

Egypt opposition leader Nour blocked from travel

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Egypt's opposition leader Ayman Nour

Egyptian opposition leader Ayman Nour, the main challenger to Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak in the 2005 election, said on Wednesday that authorities had barred him from travelling to the United States.

Nour, who was jailed shortly after the 2005 vote on forgery charges, had been due to travel to New York, where he said he had been invited by the Council on Foreign Relations to give an address next week on the political situation in Egypt.

"I was not allowed to travel," Nour said, describing the decision as politically motivated.

"This is illegal according to ... the constitution, which says that all Egyptians are entitled to leave the country or emigrate whenever and wherever they desire."

Nour, who came a distant second to Mubarak in Egypt's first multi-candidate presidential elections, was released in February on health grounds after spending over three years in jail on charges he says were fabricated to force him out of politics.

A source in the prosecutor's office said that under the conditions of his release, Nour was allowed to travel abroad only for medical treatment. The source said that Nour, who attended a conference in Belgium in April, had been permitted make that trip on medical grounds.

Nour returned from jail to find his liberal Ghad movement in tatters after a pro-government splinter faction had tried to seize control of the party.

He said last month that he was launching a campaign to prevent Mubarak from passing on the presidency of the most populous Arab country to his politician son Gamal, who has been tipped by analysts as his most likely successor.

Mubarak, 81 and in power since 1981, has not said whether he will seek a sixth six-year term in office in the 2011 presidential vote. He has never appointed a successor, encouraging speculation about who will govern next.

Political analysts say the rules governing the presidential race make it almost impossible for anyone to mount a serious challenge to the ruling party's candidate. Nour is unable to run because of his conviction.

Both Mubaraks deny that Gamal is being groomed for the presidency. Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif has said it is still too early to expect Mubarak to decide whether to run again for president in 2011.

Nazif said that should Mubarak decide against running, the ruling party could find a candidate. Asked if Gamal was up to the job, Nazif said he saw him as a possibility.

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