FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

Dictator Regret

THE SOURCE: "The Costs of Relying on Aging Dictators" by Caroline Sevier, in ***Middle East Quarterly***, Summer 2008.

Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak turned 80 in May. Saudi king Abdullah will be 84 in August. Tunisian president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali celebrated his 71st birthday last September, and Oman's sultan Qaboos is the youngster of the group at age 67. Official Washington counts these four Western-allied dictators as among the bulwarks of stability in the Middle East. None of them has a clear successor with popular support.

Egypt, home to one in three Arabs, has stifled both Islamic and secular alternatives to the Mubarak regime, writes Caroline Sevier, manager of foreign policy and defense studies at the American Enterprise Institute. Mubarak appears to be grooming his son, Gamal, as his successor, despite Gamal's lack of military and political support.

There are nearly 150 official candidates for the Saudi kingship, all descendants of the patriarch Ibn Saud, and any new king must be chosen by consensus of the roughly 7,000 members of the increasingly fractious royal family. In Tunisia, Ben Ali has suppressed opposition, along with almost all civil liberties, and prevented potential rivals from acquiring the skills, experience, and support that might allow them to step into the presidency. And Oman, bordering the vital oil corridor of the Strait of Hormuz, possesses a plan of succession decreed by Sultan Qaboos: Upon his death, his family will decide on a new sultan; if it deadlocks, he's left an envelope with his pick.

Simple biology makes it unlikely that the four leaders will govern for much longer, but there has been little contingency planning in Washington. The Bush administration once made it a priority to promote democracy in the Middle East, Sevier says, but soon retired the rhetoric in favor of promoting stability. Without more focus on the coming successions, that strategy will prove no more successful than the one it replaced.

ECONOMICS, LABOR & BUSINESS

The Rule of Slogans

THE SOURCE: "Order in the Jungle," in ***The Economist***, March 13, 2008.

Dani Rodrik, the star development economist at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, recently made a startling admission: He has been throwing around the latest big idea in economics—the rule of law—without a clear fix on what it means. The rule of law is the reigning motherhood-and-apple-pie issue of developmental economics, write the editors of *The Economist*. But although a national devotion to the rule of law seems to be an unalloyed blessing, it's a concept that eludes a universal definition, and it doesn't necessarily produce strong economic results.

Back in the 1980s, the "Washington consensus" was in vogue: Get the policies right—budgets, trade, regulation—and prosperity will surely follow. But the Asian economic crisis of 1997–98 eroded economists' confidence that they knew what the right policies actually were. It was also not clear whether macroeconomic tinkering made a smidgeon of difference if the rules of the game were a mess, *The Economist* says.

A new consensus quickly emerged. Adherence to the rule of law became the latest orthodoxy: National wealth will increase in countries that (a) establish political accountability, (b) improve the quality of the bureaucracy, and (c) follow the rule of law. Corruption should be battled. The judiciary should be reformed. Two economists even calculated a "300 percent dividend" that was supposed to accrue to a nation that significantly raised the quality of its "governance" in the long run. Sure enough, almost every rich country (with the "arguable exceptions" of Italy and Greece) scored well on the rule-of-law measures, and most poor countries did not.