

# Youth and Silent Protest in Egypt

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**Frustrated youths largely boycotted the first phase of the parliamentary elections, and tensions could once again boil over unless political elites put aside their personal interests and commit to achieving the goals of the 2011 revolution.**

On October 18, the first round of parliamentary elections began in Egypt, the first since Gen. Abdul Fattah al-Sisi became president despite promises to hold them years earlier. According to the roadmap announced by then defense minister Sisi following the removal of President Mohamed Morsi in July 2013, parliamentary elections were scheduled for November 2013. However, delays abounded: interim President Adly Mansour issued a decree postponing the elections until the beginning of the new year, then the Supreme Constitutional Court declared in early March 2015 that the Election Law was "unconstitutional," and the High Elections Committee announced that the elections would be postponed for a second time.

Now, after two years without a legislature, parliamentary elections are finally taking place. In these elections, 5,420 candidates are running for 448 individual seats while 420 candidates from the closed list system compete over the 120 seats allocated for party-list candidates.

Early indications for voter participation on the first and second days of this election cycle show remarkably low turnout, though statements from officials, official bodies, and organizations monitoring the elections offer contradictory figures on the first day's turnout. The High Elections Committee announced that 1 percent of voters participated during the first day, although reporting that a quarter of eligible voters participated by the second day, while Prime Minister Sherif Ismail stated that voter participation reached around 15 percent. The Egyptian Center for the Study of the Media and Public Opinion (Takamul Misr) reported that participation in this first stage reached only 3.6 percent.

According to early indications, there has been a noticeable reluctance to vote among Egyptian youths 18 to 29 years old, who comprise 60 percent of all eligible voters. Low youth turnout is due to an accumulation of multiple factors,

both political and economic, that have led to a state of frustration among a large segment of the youths. This segment of the population has acutely felt the restricting of freedoms since the July 2013 coup.

The state of frustration and dissatisfaction is much lower in Egypt's older adult population than its youths, as a recent poll shows. This poll revealed that respondents view the policies of the Egyptian government "very positively" (48 percent) or "fairly positively" (24 percent). The likely explanation for the discrepancy between youth and adult groups is that the majority of the latter view the performance of the government from the perspective of security and stability in contrast to youths, who largely prioritize issues of political and economic reform.

Egypt's economic situation continues to deteriorate. The government has failed to adopt effective measures and policies to contain the crisis, further impacting youths negatively. The media's language of incitement toward voices in opposition to the current political regime, coupled with the Egyptian elite's abandonment of youths' demands for political reform, have also played a large role in causing young people to be disinclined to vote.

Despite President Sisi's television appearance reminding citizens of the importance of participating in the electoral process, youths clearly failed to respond. They have seen all channels of opinion and expression closed off to them after the infamous protest law was issued amid a parliamentary vacuum, which allowed security forces to use excessive force against anyone protesting the policies of the current regime. The law led to the many arrests of youths during protests and instances of political violence that Egypt has witnessed over the past few months. Meanwhile, calls by youths for the president to pardon political prisoners have been futile. Tightened restrictions have even reached social networking websites, which played such an important role in the lead-up to the 2011 Revolution. In the past few months, many activists on social networking platforms have been arrested and imprisoned. Anyone who criticizes the government is now a target for the security agencies and at the mercy of politically motivated courts that issue random mass verdicts. The vast majority of the youths have now recognized that the revolution for which they shed their blood was in vain, especially after watching Mubarak-era figures return as candidates in the elections. Thus, boycotting the current parliamentary elections was the only realistic and safe way for youths to express their displeasure with the repressive and marginalizing policies pursued by the current regime. The boycott serves as a silent strike -- a referendum on the performance of the Sisi regime over the past sixteen months in office.

The worsening economic situation has also played a large role in the reluctance of many young people to vote. Those that participated in the revolution seeking "bread, freedom, and social justice," thereby overthrowing the Mubarak regime and its corrupt figures, have not noticed any economic changes since Sisi came to power. Despite the government's attempts to present a parcel of plans to address an economy that suffers from rampant corruption, unemployment, and the expansion of the budget deficit due to fuel subsidies, most of these plans have proven to be ineffective. The worsening economic situation affects, in turn, the daily lives of the citizens who suffer from price hikes because of the regime's inability to meet their simplest needs, from health and education to basic public services. These citizens have not experienced any returns from the economic projects carried out by the government, such as the new Suez Canal project, the fantastical project to build one million housing units, or the new capital that the media extolled until citizens discovered that project's main purpose was publicity and increase of legitimacy for the current regime. The average citizen, preoccupied with his day-to-day livelihood due to the worsening economic situation, suffers from frustration and no longer believes that his participation in the electoral process will change anything.

This failure is not limited to the political regime. Rather, it extends to the political elites who failed to communicate with the youths and marginalized them instead. The elites believed they were excited young people who did not possess enough experience to effectively participate in the political system. They adopted positions incompatible with youths' aspirations: political reform and freedom. Instead of supporting the youths and benefiting from their

energy in order to achieve economic growth and political reform, the political elites threw themselves into the arms of the regime and began to accuse the protesting youths of treachery and foreign influence. They even began to call for the current regime to strike at the opposition with an iron fist. Because of their indifference, these elites -- who should be helping the youths who strove to achieve reform -- now stand in the way of it.

Both the pro-government and private media owned by businessmen have also played a large role in causing reluctance among youths to involve themselves in the electoral process. The same media that adopted a hostile position toward the youth opposition and accused them of trying to destroy the Egyptian state now try to motivate them to participate in the electoral process. It is as if the media has called on the youths to preserve the regime's dignity in front of the world but works to marginalize them after their role of legitimization is over. At the end of the first day of voting, after the media discovered that the youths really had boycotted the electoral process, the apparently false encouragement was replaced with threats and intimidation. Some of the voices on the media cast doubt on the patriotism of those youths who boycotted the elections and disparagingly claimed they would not have any right to ask the government for services or jobs in the future.

The political tensions that Egypt is now experiencing will not end unless the current regime realizes that the youths, who overthrew a corrupt regime over the course of a few days, can once more become angry and revolt. Some may view the lack of youth participation in the electoral process as a reflection of the state of political deadlock rather than protest, especially after youths became absorbed by the events experienced in the aftermath of the January Revolution. But the boycott of the elections did not occur spontaneously; youth organizations mobilized their peers through the use of social networking sites to spread their message. The January revolution that toppled the Mubarak regime triggered the use of social networking pages, becoming the only safe tool for expression.

The path to democracy in Egypt cannot continue in this state of unprecedented oppression, injustice, marginalization, and incitement. Thus, the regime should work to initiate national reconciliation. It must enter into a real dialogue with its rival political factions to reach an end to the state of political tension that stands in the way of any growth or reform. Furthermore, the political elites should play a more positive role working alongside Egyptian youths to support the civil state and commit to achieving the goals of the 2011 Revolution rather than supporting their personal interests. I believe that the first step the regime should pursue if they really do desire to end the current political crisis and to establish the principles of transitional justice is the unconditional release of all political prisoners, of whom the overwhelming majority are youths. Finally, the media should remain committed to neutral language that is free from incitement and does not falsify facts.

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