

Egypt's New Elections Formula to Yield Familiar Results

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Brief Analysis

Given the latest redistricting efforts and the absence of major Islamist opposition, the upcoming vote is set to produce a throwback parliament that is largely beholden to the president's camp.

Egypt's parliamentary elections, the first round of which begins this weekend, will almost surely consolidate the country's autocratic trajectory. The format favors two important constituencies: politicians aligned with the security services, and candidates from the rural power centers. The results will therefore bolster President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi's government in the near term, increasing its internal cohesion while extending its influence into the countryside.

THE LONG ROAD TO MAJLIS AL-SHAB STREET

This is Egypt's first parliamentary election in nearly four years. The previous legislature was dissolved on June 14, 2012, when the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) ruled that the November 2011-January 2012 elections -- in which Islamists won nearly three-quarters of the lower house, the People's Assembly -- were unconstitutional because they did not include sufficient representation for independents. Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi, who was elected president ten days later, vowed to reverse this decision, but the judiciary blocked his attempt to call back parliament that July. It also struck down two related measures: a controversial January 2013 elections law passed by the Brotherhood-dominated upper house of parliament, the Shura Council, which permitted religious campaigning and enabled legislators to switch their affiliations after elections; and a presidential declaration calling for parliamentary elections in March 2013.

When Egypt's military responded to mass protests by ousting Morsi in July 2013, it included new legislative elections in its post-Morsi roadmap, along with an amended constitution and new presidential elections. While the Shura Council was permanently abolished under the new constitution, the government struggled to find an electoral formula for the renamed House of Representatives that would pass judicial muster. Earlier this year, the SCC objected to the apportionment of districts under Sisi's declared electoral "law," postponing the unicameral parliamentary vote from March 2015 until now.

FORMAT DETERMINES THE VICTORS

This is the third straight legislative election in which Egypt is experimenting with a new format. Even if the election is conducted fairly, the country's recent history demonstrates that the format often determines the outcome.

From 1990 to 2005, Egypt was divided into 222 electoral districts, each of which elected two members of the People's Assembly -- one professional, and one worker or farmer. The president appointed an additional ten members, bringing the total to 454. For the 2010 elections, the last to be held under President Hosni Mubarak, an additional 64 seats were added, all reserved for women; for this

segment of the election, the country was subdivided into 32 districts that chose two women each, bringing the seat total to 518.

This individual candidacy system, in which each district was relatively small, favored two key power centers: wealthy businessmen in the urban areas who were often close to the security services, and the rural power centers, meaning the clans of the Nile Delta and the tribes of Upper Egypt, Sinai, and the Western Desert. For the businessmen, a seat in parliament granted wide legal immunity, and thus greater freedom to do business on the gray or black market. For rural candidates, winning a seat also reinforced a clientelist system in which parliamentarians supported the regime in exchange for access to state resources that they could distribute to their supporters in the countryside. The electoral districts often corresponded with areas that the clans and tribes dominated politically and economically, so they could mobilize voters much more effectively than the legal opposition parties, which were weak in the cities and practically invisible outside them.

Under Mubarak, the only significant challenge to these two power centers was the Muslim Brotherhood, whose hierarchical structure enabled it to mobilize nationwide as no other faction could (see "[The Unbreakable Muslim Brotherhood: Grim Prospects for a Liberal Egypt](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-unbreakable-muslim-brotherhood-grim-prospects-for-a-liberal-egypt)" (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-unbreakable-muslim-brotherhood-grim-prospects-for-a-liberal-egypt>)) During the 2005 elections, Mubarak kept the voting relatively free during the early rounds under pressure from Washington, allowing the Brotherhood to win an unprecedented 20 percent of the seats.

Following Mubarak's 2011 ouster, a more complicated electoral format was created: Egyptians would select two-thirds of parliament (332 seats) through party list voting and one-third (166 seats) through individual candidacy races, with the president appointing 10 members, bringing the total to 508. For the party list voting, 46 districts were created, each sending between 4 and 12 members to parliament depending on its population; winners were determined through proportional representation. For the individual candidacy voting, 83 districts were created, each electing two representatives: one professional and one farmer or worker.

Fewer districts meant larger districts, which hurt the rural clans and tribes by forcing them to compete with each other. In response, many of them decided to sit out the 2011-2012 elections. At the same time, larger districts helped the Islamists -- given their national mobilizing capabilities, they were able to win nearly three-quarters of the 2012 parliament, with the Brotherhood's electoral alliance winning a 47 percent plurality and the Salafists finishing second with 24 percent.

Table 1. Seat Distribution in Egyptian Parliament by Election Year

(/sites/default/files/imports/EgyptParliamentSeatsTable1-Oct2015.jpg)

	1990–2005	2010	2011–2012	2015
Individual candidacy seats	444	444	166	448
Party list seats	0	0	332	120
Seats reserved for women	0	64	0	0
Presidential appointees	10	10	10	28
Total seats	454	518	508	596

Table 2. Number of Egyptian Parliamentary Districts by Election Year

(/sites/default/files/imports/EgyptParliamentSeatsTable2-Oct2015.jpg)

	1990–2005	2010	2011–2012	2015
Individual candidacy districts	222	222	83	203
Districts reserved for women	0	32	0	0
Party list districts	0	0	46	4

NEW FORMAT, OLD VICTORS

The format for the latest elections once again reshapes Egypt's electoral map -- largely to the advantage of those who fared well during the Mubarak era. The parliament is being expanded to 596 seats, of which Sisi will appoint 28. For the individual candidacy segment, 203 districts will choose 448 representatives (or approximately three-quarters of parliament), meaning that the districts will be much smaller. According to a former Interior Ministry official who now advises the government on elections, this system was created with the clans and tribes in mind (see "[Clan Warfare in Egypt](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/klan-warfare-in-egypt)" (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/klan-warfare-in-egypt>)). From Cairo's perspective, gerrymandering districts to satisfy these rural interests will prevent them from clashing with each other on election day.

Meanwhile, the party list segment will feature four electoral districts, two of which will elect 15 seats while the other two elect 45, for a total of 120, or one-fifth of parliament. While the massive size of these districts would ordinarily benefit Islamists, such factions are not

expected to be a major factor in this election. The government's decapitation and suppression of the Brotherhood has diminished its mobilizing capabilities, and the Salafists are no longer unified politically as they were in 2011-2012. The Salafist Nour Party is the only Islamist faction on the ballot, and it was unable to register its lists in two of the four districts. Moreover, a significant media campaign against religious parties may deter voters from supporting Nour candidates under the current repressive political conditions, while a ban on full face veils (*niqabs*) at polling stations will suppress the Salafist female vote.

The faction most likely to fill the vacuum is "For the Love of Egypt," the only coalition to be registered in all four party list districts. Headed by former general Sameh Seif al-Yazal -- who has occasionally served as a media surrogate for the military -- this umbrella group includes approximately twenty non-Islamist parties considered close to the domestic security services, including the Wafd, Free Egyptians, and Conference Party. It also includes many former parliamentarians from the Mubarak era, as well as representatives from various state and university bodies (who are typically approved by the security services before being appointed) and former military, police, and intelligence officials.

While Yazal denies that Sisi's government backs "For the Love of Egypt," he has said that his list will support the president in parliament -- this includes approving the hundreds of laws Sisi has issued during his first sixteen months in office. Under the current political circumstances, the list's de facto affiliation with Sisi will likely help it at the polls. And since party list seats will be awarded according to a winner-take-all system rather than proportionally, a narrow "For the Love of Egypt" majority could translate into control of one-fifth of parliament, making it the only coherent -- and therefore largest -- legislative bloc.

A BOOST TO SISI

The elections will benefit those power centers that support Sisi but have not been integrated into his government until now. As a result, the vote will bolster Sisi's regime in the immediate term. The anticipated success of rural power centers will extend his regime's influence into the countryside, and the Mubarak-era clientelist system might be resurrected. By the same token, the anticipated success of "For the Love of Egypt" will likely give him reliable support in parliament, while also incorporating some prominent parties and political figures into his sphere.

To be sure, the elections will be a lightning rod for excluded factions, particularly the Brotherhood and revolutionary activists. The results might also alienate Salafists, particularly if the Nour Party performs poorly as expected. In the short run, however, none of these forces appears capable of altering Egypt's political trajectory because they cannot mobilize a critical mass of the people. After four years of near constant political tumult, many (perhaps most) Egyptians are uninterested in another revolution and may be apathetic toward politics more generally. Therefore, this weekend's voter turnout will likely be low -- but turnout at protests against the elections will be substantially lower.

The consolidation of Egypt's autocratic trajectory through elections will generate significant discomfort in Washington, which has rightly objected to Sisi's crackdown on oppositionists, media critics, and civil society. But the Obama administration should bear in mind that it cannot influence Egypt's domestic politics in a more democratic direction under the current circumstances. Sisi and his supporters still believe they are locked in a kill-or-be-killed struggle with the Brotherhood, which has called for Sisi's death and vowed to avenge Morsi's ouster; as a result, they view authoritarianism as essential to their self-preservation. So while Washington should not bless these elections, it should recognize that there is not much upside to cursing them either.

Eric Trager is the Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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