

Egyptian Elections: Beyond Winning

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Brief Analysis

The legitimacy of Egypt's next president will depend on the credibility of tomorrow's elections, yet credibility may not be enough for many Egyptians.

Tomorrow, Egyptians go to the polls for the first round of presidential elections, the first balloting for a new chief executive since the revolt that toppled former president Hosni Mubarak. With the Islamists dominating the parliament, attention in the West is likely to be narrowly focused on the winning candidate and the regional and bilateral implications of an Islamist sweep or a divided government in Cairo. While the results are certainly important, the process will be critical because if Egyptians do not perceive the process as credible, the next president may emerge with a legitimacy deficit, reigniting popular protests throughout the country.

The paradox, of course, is that regardless of how credible the elections are deemed, it is all but assured that many Egyptians will not accept the results -- or their new president -- as legitimate.

It's been a busy year for elections in the state. This contest constitutes the fourth time in fifteen months that Egyptians have gone to vote, with the bicameral legislature polls consisting of up to three rounds. Nevertheless, while the historic nature of the presidential vote and the Islamist-secular dynamic has generated a lot of interest, signs indicate that the enthusiasm for the process is diminishing. The numbers since may suggest election fatigue.

During the March 2011 constitutional referendum, Egypt's first post-Mubarak vote, 41.2 percent of eligible Egyptians cast ballots. Yet, when elections for the Shura Council -- the upper house of the legislature -- were held in January and February 2012, only 6.5 percent of 25.4 million eligible voters turned out in the first round and 12.2 percent for the second round.

The highest turnout occurred during the People's Assembly elections, which were held in three rounds from late November to mid-January. Approximately 54 percent of eligible voters cast ballots, but this may have been buoyed by the fact that -- based on an edict by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, or SCAF, that was later quietly rescinded -- most Egyptians believed they would be fined 500 LE (nearly \$90) if they did not participate. Absent the

fine, which amounts to nearly six weeks of wages for 40 percent of Egyptians, it's not clear how motivated Egyptians will be to go to the polls.

Another development that could impact turnout is the SCAF's threat to issue an "interim constitution" granting sweeping powers to the president and the military, including control over the sovereign ministries -- defense, interior, justice, finance, and others -- and giving the president authority to dissolve parliament. Promulgating this constitution, if only temporarily, may dishearten Egyptians, causing them to stay home, but alternatively it could drive a large voter turnout by propelling voters to send SCAF a message.

Egyptians are going to be watching the voting process itself quite carefully. With dozens of American staffers of U.S.-based democracy promotion organizations still standing trial in Egypt in absentia, only a few foreign organizations -- including just one U.S.-based organization, the Carter Center -- plan to monitor the elections on the ground. As of May 16, however, credentials for these monitors still had not been issued by the Egyptian Higher Committee for Elections. Worse, the Carter Center has already been informed that it will not be allowed to observe any single polling station for more than thirty minutes.

Still, it may nonetheless prove difficult for the military to perpetrate wholesale fraud. Historically, that task has been the purview of the Egyptian Ministry of the Interior, an organization that is not at present working closely with the SCAF. Moreover, thousands of domestic Egyptian monitors are slated to observe the balloting. On Monday, for example, a campaign official working for Abdel Monem Abouel Fetouh told the Egyptian daily al-Yawm al-Saba that the candidate had "nearly 100,000 volunteers and registered representatives" to "follow up on irregularities" during the voting and spend the evening in the polling stations.

The first round of the elections, which last two days, starts on May 23. The runoff -- should no candidate gain a majority of the votes in the first round -- will be held on June 16-17. While the balloting could go off without a hitch, it is not difficult to imagine problems arising. Even if turnout is high, irregularities are sporadic, and violence is limited, many Egyptians may cry foul if in June any candidate other than the Salafist-backed Abouel Fetouh or the Muslim Brotherhood's candidate Muhammad Morsi wins. To wit, should the erstwhile and secular regime figures Amr Mousa or Ahmed Shafiq carry the day, claims of SCAF fraud -- and mass protests -- may ensue. And if the SCAF issues the interim constitution between the voting rounds, it could also affect the outcome.

Nearly sixteen months after the revolution, Egypt is still struggling politically, economically, and in terms of security. The election, if credible, has the potential to some degree to help stabilize the state on these fronts. The key will be the process.

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