

Egypt's Islamists Take Over an Uncertain Parliament

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Brief Analysis

The Egyptian parliament's ill-defined mandate will be a source of tension between the Muslim Brotherhood, the ruling military council, and the Salafis.

On January 23, Egypt's first post-Mubarak legislature will be seated. The lower house of parliament, known as the People's Assembly, will be dominated by Islamists, with the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party and the Salafist Nour Party together slated to control nearly 70 percent of the 498 elected seats. Because the voting was judged to be free and fair and the results were so decisive, the legislature will emerge with unprecedented popular legitimacy. At the same time, however, the extent of parliament's authority remains ill defined. Going forward, this lack of clarity will be a source of tension between the Islamists and the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF).

Parliament's role has been uncertain throughout the transition. A March 2011 referendum tasked the body with appointing a new constitutional drafting committee. Yet after realizing that this formula would enable the Islamists to significantly change the political system -- including a shift from a presidential to a parliamentary model -- the SCAF unilaterally announced that it would ignore the referendum results and select the majority of the constitutional committee itself.

While the SCAF envisions a limited role for the People's Assembly, the Muslim Brotherhood has a more expansive view. According to MB political leader Essam al-Erian, the group hopes to establish parliament as a center of authority, responsible not only for helping to craft the new constitution, but also for legislating and providing oversight to the SCAF-appointed caretaker government.

Although these differing understandings are already a source of controversy, it is unclear whether the Islamists will seek a showdown with the SCAF over this issue. For now, the MB -- which controls some 46 percent of the seats -- appears to be in a more conciliatory mood. Earlier this month, for example, al-Erian said that the group would not challenge the SCAF by trying to remove the current government with a no-confidence vote. Nevertheless, conflict

between the Islamists and the SCAF may prove to be a recurring theme of the coming parliamentary session.

Other big issues facing the legislature are the deteriorating economy and internecine discord between the MB and the Salafis. Recognizing the urgency of the economic problem, MB officials met with International Monetary Fund representatives in Cairo this week to discuss the terms of a \$3 billion loan. Beyond the economy, tensions between the MB and Salafis are likely to deepen as the Brotherhood is pressured from the right to advance more socially conservative legislation consistent with Islamic law.

Indeed, the Nour Party will likely be an ongoing thorn in the MB's side, undermining parliamentary initiatives and embarrassing its somewhat less militant Islamist cousin. Unlike the Brotherhood, the Salafis -- unburdened with the responsibility of governing but holding a substantial 23 percent of the seats -- will focus most of their attention on pushing their social program, which aims to make Egypt even more Islamic. Already this week, for example, Nour denounced the prospect of IMF loans to Egypt -- necessary to forestall a crisis associated with depleted foreign reserves -- as "usury" and a violation of Islamic law.

The MB would no doubt prefer to take a less provocative and more gradual approach to implementing Islamic law, but with the Salafis nipping at their heels, they may not have that luxury. These kinds of disagreements -- which may eventually extend to alcohol, beach attire, and myriad other social mores -- will be awkward for the Brotherhood. In the end, they will likely push the group toward an even more conservative social agenda.

Given this focus on domestic matters, foreign policy will probably not be a priority for the legislature. Yet the dismal economic prospects and the Islamists' need to demonstrate a policy "success" could spur the parliament to make Israel its whipping boy. Indeed, calls for shifting away from Israel already command broad consensus across the Egyptian political spectrum. At the very least, the legislature will be sorely tempted to take the populist route and rail against the 1979 peace treaty. Although such sentiments may be confined to mere rhetoric, they could also coalesce -- courtesy of parliament -- into a popular referendum on the treaty, a goal the MB leadership has repeatedly articulated. As the Obama administration pursues its ongoing dialogue with the Brotherhood, conveying the consequences of this tack -- for Egypt, for the bilateral relationship, and for regional stability -- should be the priority.

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