

# Egypt's New Political Alliance Could Boost the Islamists

by [Eric Trager \(/experts/eric-trager\)](/experts/eric-trager)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Eric Trager \(/experts/eric-trager\)](/experts/eric-trager)

Eric Trager was the Esther K. Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute.



## Brief Analysis

The June 22 announcement that a youth wing of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is splitting off to form its own secular party is emblematic of the unprecedented political activity in post-Mubarak Egypt. June 21 saw the second meeting of the National Democratic Alliance for Egypt, with fourteen smaller parties agreeing to join the coalition's founders, the MB's newly formed Freedom and Justice Party and the liberal Wafd Party. Although the alliance is unsustainable in its current form, its mere existence points to two disturbing trends in Egyptian politics: first, parties are negotiating over the distribution of candidates to predetermine electoral outcomes and, second, anti-Western foreign policy views are uniting parties with wildly divergent views on domestic issues.

## A Big Tent on Wobbly Poles

The parties that have joined the alliance cover the diverse spectrum of Egyptian political ideologies. In addition to Wafd and the Freedom and Justice Party, members include the liberal al-Ghad and Egypt Freedom Parties, the leftist Tagammu Party, the nationalist Nasserist and Karama Parties, the Salafist Nour Party, and the centrist Justice Party, among others.

Many of these factions hold vastly divergent views on the role of religion in politics. The Freedom and Justice Party desires an Islamic state in which laws are derived from sharia, and the Nour Party seeks a more puritanical version of that legal system. Alternatively, the liberal, nationalist, and leftist groups all advocate a religiously neutral "civil state."

For its part, Wafd has long championed Muslim-Coptic equality, and some party members have dissented against aligning with the MB. At the moment, the Wafd bloc led by chairman El Sayed El Badawy, who is considered relatively friendly toward Islamists, is prevailing over the more secular bloc aligned with former chairman Mahmoud Abaza. But those who oppose cooperation with the MB have vowed to continue the fight.

The alliance has also exhibited strong disagreements on the formula for the parliamentary elections scheduled to take place in September. The Freedom and Justice Party, which will draw on the MB's advanced organizing capabilities, prefers the current formula in which two parliamentarians are elected from each of the country's 222 districts. (The previously mentioned breakaway youth party will not significantly undercut the MB's mobilization capabilities in the short run; the new faction is explicitly distancing itself from its former parent and is therefore

unlikely to disrupt the MB's vast interpersonal networks before September.) Unsurprisingly, smaller parties -- including al-Ghad and Wafd -- are demanding proportional representation, which would enable them to run on their parties' national name recognition without having to worry about their limited local organizing capabilities.

Alliance members also disagree on whether formulating a new constitution should precede the elections. The Islamist parties believe that holding elections beforehand would yield greater victories and strengthen their influence on the writing of the new constitution. In contrast, liberal and leftist parties insist that they need more time to organize effectively and have argued that elections cannot take place without a new constitution -- or at least a set of amendments -- to govern the electoral process.

These sources of tension make the coalition unsustainable. So why are its members pushing ahead anyway?

## **Undermining Democratic Competition**

**T**he alliance's divergent parties are cooperating with one goal in mind: coordinating candidacies in the September elections to ensure victory. As Freedom and Justice Party leader Essam al-Erian put it, "Now that this coalition exists, it will dictate the electoral outcome." The various alliance members hope to reach an agreement to ensure their inclusion in the next parliament, which, in all likelihood, will be tasked with writing the new constitution.

Continuation of the district-based voting system is the most probable scenario: the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) strongly prefers elections sooner rather than later, and a significant reconfiguration of the electoral system would likely delay the transition process. Yet the new coalition seems bent on exploiting this arrangement -- if alliance parties agree to run in certain districts in exchange for not running in others, they would deny voters the opportunity to choose from many parties with diverse ideologies.

Most important, district-based electoral coordination would strongly favor the Muslim Brotherhood. As the only political force with significant, nationwide mobilizing capabilities, the MB would be able to push ahead with its plan to field Freedom and Justice Party candidates in 49 percent of all electoral districts. And thanks to the alliance, it would face even less competition in each of those districts. Moreover, because smaller parties in the coalition would owe their success largely to MB assistance, the Brotherhood's actual parliamentary influence would likely exceed the number of seats it wins.

Under the Mubarak regime, opposition parties likewise coordinated with the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). The few opposition members who won parliamentary seats typically owed those victories to deals they cut with the NDP and therefore rarely challenged the regime in meaningful ways. If the same opposition parties now make deals with the MB, the result would be a relatively uncompetitive parliamentary system dominated by Islamists.

## **Vague Bromides and Anti-Westernism**

**T**he ideological and strategic diversity of the coalition's member parties will complicate efforts to create a unified vision moving forward. Following its June 21 meeting, however, the alliance released a statement hinting at areas of broad consensus. For the most part, the statement consisted of vague bromides about "citizenship as the basis of society guaranteeing political, economic, and social rights" and "the devolution of power through universal, free, and clean elections." The most central and divisive issues affecting Egypt's political future were completely left out: the role of religion in the state, the sources of Egyptian law, and the state's historic role in regulating parties and civil society organizations.

In fact, Tuesday's statement was specific in only one area. Turning to foreign policy, the alliance declared that it aimed to "open a strategic dialogue with Iran and Turkey regarding the future of the regime and review the settlement process [i.e., peace treaty] with Israel, on the basis that it is not a real peace in light of the unjust aggression and violation of the Palestinian right to self-determination." Essentially, alliance members agreed to

move closer to Washington's regional nemesis while denigrating the Camp David Accords, arguably Washington's greatest Middle East policy success.

Such declarations reflect the MB's oft-repeated views, demonstrating the ease with which the Brotherhood can co-opt smaller parties that previously accepted the accords -- such as al-Ghad -- in exchange for a potential share of power. Whether or not the alliance survives its internal disagreements, Washington should take its foreign policy views seriously, for they represent the one area of consensus among otherwise dissimilar parties. The SCAF is certainly taking them seriously, even implementing some of these views to appease newly empowered political forces -- since Mubarak's ouster, Cairo has allowed Iranian warships to pass through the Suez Canal, failed to adequately protect pipelines that pump gas to Israel and Jordan, and endorsed rapprochement between Hamas and Fatah.

## U.S. Options

**B**ecause the National Democratic Alliance for Egypt will likely be another transient player in the country's transition process, U.S. policymakers have little reason to engage it now. Yet given the likelihood that some of its member parties will continue cooperating with the Muslim Brotherhood, Washington must be prepared for a parliament in which the MB's actual influence exceeds the number of seats it holds -- a newfound power that the group would no doubt use to push Egyptian foreign policy away from U.S. interests.

Moving forward, U.S. policymakers should emphasize that democracy requires real competition, and that attempts to limit voter options through backroom dealmaking will only resurrect the corrupt practices that the protestors of Tahrir Square sought to end. Washington should also help train Egyptian liberals to compete better politically, as well as support efforts to create effective coalitions among liberal factions. These parties would be less likely to succumb to MB co-optation if they believed they stood a better chance of electoral success on their own.

Finally, U.S. policymakers should show the SCAF that it could face less pressure if it conceded to liberals and leftists on domestic political demands -- such as postponing elections -- rather than conceding to Islamists on foreign policy. The ruling council is understandably concerned that it will be the next target of mass protests. Accordingly, Washington should remind Cairo that liberal and leftist activists catalyzed the revolutionary January protests, not Islamists.

*Eric Trager is a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of Pennsylvania, where he is writing his dissertation on Egyptian opposition parties. He conducted his fieldwork during the January 2011 anti-Mubarak revolt, and was previously a Fulbright fellow in Egypt from 2006 to 2007. ❖*

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