

Prospects for Change following Legislative Elections in Egypt

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Brief Analysis

On November 17, 2005, Khairi Abaza and Michele Dunne discussed the electoral process in Egypt, the state of political reform, and the prospects for change following the legislative elections now underway. Khairi Abaza is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, and previously served as secretary of the Cultural Committee and member of the Foreign Affairs Committee of Egypt's Wafd Party. Michele Dunne is editor of the Arab Reform Bulletin at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and a visiting professor of Arabic at Georgetown University. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Michele Dunne

The general outlook for political change and democratization in Egypt contains both positive and negative elements. Compared to other Arab states, Egypt is well supplied with the institutions needed to build a democracy: an effective and functioning judiciary, an elected bicameral legislature, a large and vibrant press, functioning opposition political parties, and a history of parliamentary democracy. In the last year, Egypt witnessed a reawakening of political life and debate after a decade of stagnation and political deliberalization. Opposition groups have been revitalized, and new groups and movements representing the younger generation have also emerged, sparking renewed dialogue between secular and Islamic groups. Egypt has now held its first multicandidate presidential elections.

At the same time, other important factors continue to militate against real change in politics. The constitution gives a great deal of power to the president at the expense of the legislature; the parliament has no real budgetary authority and almost never originates legislation. The state of emergency in effect since 1981 and the pervasive influence of the internal security apparatus continue to play a major role in undermining political liberties. Most political forces and civil society groups enjoy very little grassroots support due to the limits placed on their ability to collect funds and organize membership; the Muslim Brotherhood, which has a history of support, is an exception due to its long history in Egyptian society.

The procedures for the current parliamentary elections differ from previous elections in several respects. For the first time, an electoral commission is administering the election, though it remains largely controlled by the Ministry

of Justice. Election monitors organized by civil society groups were granted permission to monitor the elections sufficiently in advance that they could effectively deploy, in contrast to the last-minute permission to monitor the presidential election, which came too late for most monitors to complete the necessary paperwork.

The United States has played an extremely important role in encouraging the government of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak to lead a process of reform, and U.S. attention to the issue has emboldened advocates of reform within Egyptian opposition -- even among those generally opposed to U.S. policy. The Islamists seem to have been the immediate beneficiaries of this opening; their candidates have had considerable success in the first stage of the legislative elections. That is not surprising considering their historic and organizational advantages. After all three stages of the legislative elections are completed on December 1, the Muslim Brotherhood will almost certainly have a larger presence in parliament than it ever has had before. The United States must continue to stand on principle and promote political reform in Egypt, including free and fair elections, despite what the outcome of those elections might be.

Khairi Abaza

This year, Egypt witnessed three elections in an attempt to highlight the new waves of reform undertaken by the Mubarak government: the referendum on the constitutional amendment, the presidential election, and the parliamentary elections. The first round of the parliamentary elections in Egypt has just concluded with staggering yet unsurprising results. The ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) won 69.7 percent of the vote, the Muslim Brotherhood won 20.7 percent, and the non-Islamist opposition parties tied with the independents in earning 4.8 percent. Unlike in previous elections, the Muslim Brotherhood enjoyed unprecedented margins of freedom. Its leaders were released from prison, in contrast to 1995 and 2000 elections, when they were arrested. The leader of the Muslim Brotherhood was interviewed by major national publications known to be controlled by the government.

This election was meant to emphasize the Egyptian government's serious commitment to reform. However, new and innovative irregularities were seen, which had the effect of continuing the regime's old practices of intimidation, bribery, rigged voter lists, and limits placed on independent election monitors. The new techniques for continuing old practices showed the regime's unwillingness to relinquish power or open up the system.

The successes of the Muslim Brotherhood in the elections highlights the importance of the movement in the Egyptian political scene while demonstrating the problems of the secular democratic opposition. Earlier this year, the Muslim Brotherhood used significantly less Islamic slogans and demonstrated more openness than in previous years as secular opposition groups like the Kefaya movement were becoming more popular. Yet when the non-Islamist opposition and the international community failed to engage the Muslim Brotherhood, the movement began using slogans such as Islam is the Solution as a reaction to the lack of collaboration with the opposition and supporters of democracy.

Having the Muslim Brotherhood as the largest political opposition in parliament offers a pretext to voices within the regime who justify authoritarianism on the grounds that the alternative is total control by Islamists. On the other hand, the low turnout -- around 25 percent -- proves that neither the ruling party nor the Muslim Brotherhood reflects the will of the Egyptian people. Given that the Muslim Brotherhood is better organized than the secular opposition -- having devoted considerable energy to registering its voters and turning them out at the polls -- it is quite possible that more open voter registration and higher turnout would disproportionately benefit the secular opposition, with the result that the Muslim Brotherhood's support would drop as a proportion of the larger electorate.

The crisis of democracy in Egypt is not due to a shortness of capable executives running the government; rather, it is a failure of the system. In the past two decades, the Mubarak government has received enormous economic and

political support, and yet no substantial social or economic improvements have taken place. While the current Egyptian cabinet contains dynamic, capable, and reform-minded ministers, they have failed to institute real changes due to the lack of transparency and accountability in the current system. Some members of the opposition believe the regime is instituting cosmetic reforms in the hope that the pressure for real political reform will fade away.

Support for democracy in Egypt should be defined more precisely as support for the democratic process, not a faction or a candidate in an election. The best scenario for democratic reform in Egypt would begin by encouraging the regime to collaborate and engage with the opposition. Specific goals that set timeframes for reform are the only way to build confidence among the Egyptian people in the electoral process; only with greater public confidence will greater numbers participate in the electoral process. Elections should not be viewed as a measure of success in opening up the political system. Elections are not the key to reform, but reform should be the key to free and fair elections. Only the hope of reform and the creation of a viable opposition will encourage Egyptians to participate in their government and lead to the democratization that Egypt so badly needs.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Mark Nakhla.

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