

Legislative Elections in Egypt: Another Test for Democracy

Nov 8, 2005



Brief Analysis

November 9 marks the start of legislative elections in Egypt. These are the first elections to be contested after Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak pledged to implement political reforms during his presidential campaign in September. The political opposition maintains that the legislative elections will not reflect the true will of the Egyptian people and that the political environment is still not conducive to truly democratic politics.

Background

In the 2005 legislative elections 5,414 candidates will compete for the 444 seats of the People's Assembly, Egypt's lower chamber of parliament. Half the seats are allocated to professionals, while the other half are allocated to workers and farmers -- a populist divide reminiscent of the Nasserite era, though many so-called workers and farmers are in fact wealthy businessmen. Ten more seats are to be allocated by presidential decree; these are usually granted to women and Christians to compensate for their lack of other representation in the assembly.

The elections will be held in three phases on November 9, November 20, and December 1, with elections taking place in about one-third of Egypt's provinces on each date.

The Ruling Party

The nomination of candidates opened a heated debate over who controls the National Democratic Party (NDP) and who should run on the party's ticket. The nominations proved that the old guard of veteran party leaders still plays a crucial role in the NDP. Opposed to these stalwarts, a new guard in the party has aligned itself around Mubarak's son Gamal. The new guards reached a peak when they were left to organize Hosni Mubarak's election campaign, but the old guards proved their continuing usefulness in legislative elections. However, ultimate power is held by the institution of the presidency, not the ruling party.

Nearly 2,700 party members wanted to run on the NDP's list. With only 444 seats available, many important party members were left out. There were fears of repeating the scenario of the 2000 elections, in which the NDP won 38 percent of the seats while its dissenters, who ran as independents, won 51 percent of the seats (the dissenters were readmitted to the NDP after the elections.)

The NDP has declared that 35 percent of its candidates are newcomers, though critics claim that this figure is not sufficient to inject new blood into an assembly that should pave the way for more reform. Moreover, some of the newcomers would be returning to parliament after sitting out the outgoing assembly; these former legislators can hardly be regarded as likely to revitalize the system.

Another issue for the NDP is the lack of women and Christian candidates. Only five women and one Christian are running on the party's list, a poor number considering that half of Egyptians are women and no less than 10 percent of Egypt's seventy million people are Christians.

The Opposition

In recent weeks, the Egyptian opposition made some attempts at creating a united front, with a single list of candidates for the legislative elections, to challenge the regime. Most opposition groups joined forces and created the United National Front for Change (UNFC), not only to contest elections, but more importantly to create cohesion between the forces calling for reform. This brought together opposition parties and groups including the liberal Wafd party; the leftist Tagammu party; the Arab nationalist Nasserite party; the suspended Labor party; the would-be liberal Islamist Wasat party; the unregistered Karama party; the Egyptian Movement for Change, known as Kefaya (Enough); the National Coalition for Democratic Transformation; and the National Alliance for Reform and Change. Ayman Nour's al-Ghad party was left out the UNFC, officially because of an internal strife dividing the party, but most likely because of the hostility between Nour and Wafd's leader.

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) decided to coordinate its efforts with the UNFC during the legislative elections, but opted to run its candidates on its own ticket, explaining that it had already prepared for the legislative elections long before the UNFC was created. The MB believes that the newly formed UNFC is short on time to prepare for the elections. The MB is fielding 150 candidates -- although officially they are running as independents. The group has lately been operating with unprecedented freedom from harassment compared to previous parliamentary elections. In 1995 elections, many MB leaders were being tried before military courts; in 2000 elections about six thousand MB members were arrested ahead of polling. In addition, although officially the MB is not coordinating with the ruling NDP, it is not fielding candidates in constituencies contested by key regime figures such as the chief of the presidential staff, Zakareya Azmi, or the speaker of the People's Assembly, Fathy Sourour.

Overall, the opposition is aware of the difficulty of contesting elections in the current political environment, but it is hoping that the scale of irregularities will decrease, allowing the opposition to increasing its share of seats in the assembly. After the 2000 elections, the opposition accounted for thirty-two seats: seventeen for independents affiliated with the MB, seven Wafd, six Tagammu, and two Nasserite.

A November 6 court ruling gave civil society organization the formal right to monitor the electoral process and urged the executive branch to act accordingly. Also, for the first time, the opposition is not shy on its demand for international monitors. Previously, the opposition had rejected the idea of inviting international monitors, in order to avoid being labeled as agents of foreign interests. This taboo was broken after the irregularities of the September presidential elections

Conclusion

All opposition groups remain skeptical about the intentions of the Mubarak regime and whether it will hold free and fair elections. Egypt's political environment is still not free, and the latest reforms, namely the constitutional amendment allowing for contested presidential elections, are widely seen as a change of style rather than of substance. The regime's rhetoric has outpaced its actions for change.

In addition to the general lack of civil liberties and the restrictions on political participation, the electoral process still lacks guarantees of true fairness. Egyptian courts are confronted with hundreds of suits demanding the review of voter lists, many of which include irregularities that favor the NDP. And with opposition representatives not allowed access to all stages of the electoral process, the transparency of the balloting less than ensured.

The opposition is focused on political reform, not the elections. As during the May referendum on the constitutional amendment allowing for contested presidential elections and the September presidential election, the entire opposition is united around the same demand: reform that would engage the opposition and lead to constitutional changes, putting Egypt on the road to a genuine democratic process.

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