

# Egyptian Elections: Rumblings of Change, But NDP Dominance Maintained

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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## What changed, and what didn't, in Egypt's parliamentary elections?

The dust has settled on Egypt's longest parliamentary election season ever, held in three stages from October 18 to November 14. This year's event, in which Egyptians voted out some ruling party stalwarts and the Muslim Brotherhood scored its largest victory since 1987, marked a distinct improvement over the flawed 1995 contest. However, the elections fell short of ushering in the "democratic Intifada" in Egypt that *Asharq al-Awsat* columnist Fahmi Howeidly had predicted. Beneath a patina of change, overwhelming ruling party control of the lower house of parliament was preserved, although perhaps not as easily as in the past.

## Overview

The new parliament's 444 elected seats (President Hosni Mubarak will appoint ten members of parliament [MPs]) will be distributed as follows: the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) will control 388 seats (comprised of 175 seats won by official NDP candidates and 213 by "independent" candidates who switched to the NDP upon victory); Islamist MPs, including 17 Muslim Brotherhood affiliates, will hold 19 seats; the neo-liberal Wafd party will hold 7; the leftist Nasserites and Tagammu party members, 7 and 6 seats, respectively; 1 for the rightist Liberal party; and 14 seats for "true" independents not expected to declare allegiance to any party (as in the 1995 parliament). Two seats in Alexandria remain to be filled due to a postponed vote.

Though the opposition won a combined 40 seats — the most since 1987 — the results were not much of a setback for the regime. The NDP's vast majority — 87 percent of seats, as compared to 94 percent in 1995 — will enable it to pass legislation easily. It also provides the two-thirds majority needed to nominate the president for reelection in 2005.

The regime's pledges not to allow interference in the election met with mixed results. NDP and opposition candidates alike credited the first-ever judicial supervision of all polling stations (see PolicyWatch #292) for a noticeably improved process of casting ballots. Unfortunately, as one Egyptian observer noted, "These elections

were clean on the inside [of the polling stations] but dirty on the outside." The judges' presence could not overcome the souring of the process that followed the NDP's less-than-stellar performance in stage one (winning just 20 of 150 seats before the runoff). During stage two, security forces acted in large numbers to prevent suspected opposition voters from reaching the polls — a familiar scene from past elections. By stage three, which included the hot spot of greater Cairo, credible reports of security forces' interference outside the polls, mostly in constituencies with Brotherhood candidates, increased. There were also complaints of manipulation of the voter registry.

On the whole, the campaign was marked by a striking lack of political debate beyond the Palestinian issue. The NDP slogan was simply "continuity for the sake of stability." Muslim Brotherhood candidates ran on hazy promises of personal integrity, social Islamization, and improved local services. Independents promised to provide for their constituencies, but generally articulated no larger vision. This bland campaign environment may signal that Egyptian politics has entered an especially depoliticized stage in which MPs' main role is to provide constituents with services, rather than to mobilize support for any broader ideology.

## **NDP Losses — Awkward, But Not Fatal**

**T**he NDP party slate experienced its poorest showing in years. Just 175 of its 444 candidates won, and only 52 of those won without a runoff. Among the defeated party heavyweights were nine parliamentary committee chairmen and distinguished former ministers.

Although these defeats no doubt embarrassed the regime, they do not signal the imminent demise of the party. The losses may in fact offer a convenient opportunity to undertake the housecleaning that the younger generation of party leaders, specifically President Mubarak's son Gamal, has called for.

There was no clear pattern to NDP losses and victories; some top NDP members were soundly defeated while other big names, such as Amal Osman, former minister of social affairs (who ran against a leading Brotherhood figure) and Yousef Wali, NDP secretary general, won handily. This indicates that voters were punishing those candidates seen as dreadfully out of touch with their constituencies, rather than rejecting the ruling party en masse. The NDP appears more fragmented than ever.

The 213 winning independents, most of whom were NDP members rejected for the party slate and whose platforms were largely indiscernible from that of the NDP, were the true story of the election. Their victories created an impression of weakening ruling party control of parliament, but in fact were the key to ultimate NDP dominance. Immediately after winning, they rejoined the ruling party, to a warm welcome. This is not a new phenomenon. In 1995, the NDP's 417 seats were achieved only by 100 "independents" switching back.

## **Return of the Muslim Brothers?**

**A**s in the past, this year's 72 Muslim Brotherhood candidates ran as independents, since the organization is illegal. Despite a harsh crackdown that began this summer and continued through the election, Muslim Brotherhood candidates managed to win 17 seats. Although these results are surprising, calling the Brotherhood performance "remarkable" may be something of an overstatement.

First, reports suggest that the Brotherhood's strong showing in stage one (winning 6 seats) was not anticipated, but the government made a decision not to interfere. These victories were partly due to the fact that Brotherhood candidates were best poised to benefit from the widespread anger about Palestinian crisis, which raged as the elections opened. The Brotherhood was "allowed" to gain 9 more seats in stage two, partly as a safety valve for frustrations directed at the regime's failure to take a harder line against Israel. However, by stage three — which included the Brotherhood stronghold of greater Cairo — the game had changed; Brotherhood candidates and voters were fending off substantial harassment by the security forces. They managed to win only two more seats.

Second, the Brotherhood's showing, while notable in contrast to recent elections (in 1995, only one Muslim Brother won a seat), is not its strongest ever. In the 1984 elections, the Brotherhood won 30 seats in its electoral alliance with the Wafd party. In 1987, it won 36 seats through an alliance with the Labor and Liberal parties.

Third, while the crackdown benefited Brotherhood candidates by generating voter sympathy, it may hurt the organization's parliamentary influence in the long run (as the authorities may have bet on). With most top figures behind bars, only second-tier Brothers were elected, which will limit the Brotherhood's effectiveness within parliament.

## Outlook

The new parliament will open on December 13, with veteran Fathi Sourour expected to be chosen for a third term as Speaker. Parliament is expected to consider important labor and economic legislation, and perhaps a new nongovernmental organizations law. The opposition will find it difficult to stop controversial laws, but they can still use their limited numbers to some effect by raising sensitive topics, as they did in the 1984 and 1987 parliaments. Overall, parliament will remain marginal to the real workings of politics in Egypt.

Muslim Brotherhood-regime relations will be the most important dynamic to watch. The presence of Brothers in parliament could lead the regime to reshape its stance toward the outlawed movement, which over the last few years it has tried to shut out of the formal and informal political processes. Brotherhood leaders now intend to pursue recognition as a legal political party, but this will not be approved as long as the authorities remain skeptical of the organization's denunciation of violence. More likely, toleration of the parliamentary presence will be coupled with continuing moves to contain the organization's influence in civil society, perceived as a more dangerous sphere.

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Policy #506

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