

# Egypt's Parliamentary Vote: A Democracy Test amid Regional Tension

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## Brief Analysis

**A**s rumors swirl regarding a possible Arab League summit meeting in Cairo later this month, preparations are underway for a major event on the Egyptian domestic scene: the holding of parliamentary elections. This vote, set to occur over three stages from October 18 to November 14, will be the first test of an Arab signatory to the Warsaw Declaration issued by the Community of Democracies Summit in June. Given the likelihood that Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP) will win another overwhelming parliamentary majority, the most important aspects to watch are the integrity of the electoral process, the results of a handful of highly charged races, and voter turnout.

What's At Stake Voters will select 444 representatives to the People's Assembly, two from each of the country's 222 electoral districts (the President appoints ten at-large members, bringing the total membership to 454). Despite its long history, impressive human and material resources, and potential role as counterweight to the Executive, the Assembly occupies an increasingly marginal position in the Egyptian political scene. The outgoing Assembly suffered from a reputation as a rubber-stamp for the regime (the NDP held 94 percent of the seats), and from doubts about the legality of the 1995 elections, which were the most violent in Egypt's history.

Mubarak has pledged repeatedly that this year's poll will be free and fair; he recently instructed all government agencies involved in the elections to maintain meticulous impartiality. Officials frequently refer to the Supreme Constitutional Court's July ruling that the judicial branch (rather than Interior Ministry appointees) must now supervise the voting at every polling station, not just the main stations, as evidence of the "new spirit" of this election season. Record numbers of young, first-time candidates, Copts and women on the ballot are also raising hopes for fresh faces in the next Assembly. On the other hand, skeptics point to the continuing presence of underlying factors that make a truly democratic election unlikely if not impossible. Such factors include Egypt's Emergency Law, which severely restricts candidates' activities, the mistrusted Interior Ministry's control over key parts of the election process, lack of independent monitoring, and voter apathy.

Candidates There are 4,116 candidates, slightly more than in 1995. Of these, 448 were nominated by the NDP, 428 by other parties (particularly the Wafd), and the rest are independents. The large number of candidates, especially independents, points to the Assembly's growing attraction as a vehicle for personal gain in Egypt's patronage-based political culture, rather than to a thriving pluralistic system.

Forty-two percent of the NDP's list are new faces. Notable among these are young, influential businessmen. While introducing new blood to a stagnant party apparatus is a sound idea, the inclusion of many figures with little or no political record appears to exemplify a "politics as business" trend in Assembly membership. Conversely, the rejection of so many NDP cadres from the party slate can be seen as part of the regime's time-tested strategy of rotating members in and out of the Assembly to prevent the emergence of an experienced group of parliamentarians who may become too professional and therefore hard to control.

Few of the 3,240 independent candidates are considered genuine alternatives to the NDP. As in past elections, many are actually NDP members who either did not get nominated by the party or who believe that NDP affiliation would hurt them in their local constituency. In 1995, 99 of the 111 independents elected to the Assembly were NDP members previously rejected for the party nomination.

Two potentially serious challengers to the NDP-- the Islamist-affiliated Labor party and the Muslim Brotherhood-- are illegal. The Brotherhood, which goes through waves of official toleration and regime crackdown, has suffered the latter in recent weeks, a process eerily similar to what preceded the 1995 elections. According to one unconfirmed report, 650 Brotherhood sympathizers-- prospective candidates and campaign organizers-- were detained in recent months, with the pace of arrests quickening. Still, the Brotherhood intends to field 70 or more candidates as independents.

**Key Issues to Watch Integrity of the Electoral Process.** July's court ruling, while an important step, will not itself ensure an impartial election administration. The judicial branch, charged with supervising the voting, includes both judges, viewed as relatively independent from the regime, and prosecutors, viewed more as appendages of the state and prone to manipulation. Further, the voter registry remains entirely in the hands of the Interior Ministry and has been criticized for years as deeply flawed and easily manipulated. Finally and most important, Egypt's Emergency Law, in force since 1981, restricts the basic right of free association for candidates and their potential supporters.

As in the past, it will be difficult to assess the integrity of the electoral process because the Egyptian government has again indicated that international observation missions will not be invited. This is in contrast to Morocco, Algeria, Kuwait, West Bank/Gaza, and Yemen, all of which have hosted international election observers. Moreover, although a small-scale domestic observation effort is planned, this summer's shutdown of Dr. Saad ed-Din Ibrahim's Ibn Khaldoun Center appears to have succeeded in frightening local democracy activists from mounting a more significant program.

**Key NDP Races.** Several races promise fierce battles for leading NDP figures who have never before faced electoral competition. These contests will also test the authorities' commitment to behave in a hands-off manner. In al-Menoufiya, leading Wafd party member and businessman Mohamed Kamel is running as an independent against Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs and NDP parliamentary enforcer Kamal al-Shazli. Some major battles will also be fought between leading Brotherhood figures and NDP officials, such as in the upscale Cairo district of Dokki, where the Muslim Brotherhood's deputy leader Maamoun al-Hodeibi will run against prominent NDP figure Amal Othman, former Minister of Social Affairs.

**Voter Turnout.** The apathy of the Egyptian electorate has been a hallmark of many past elections. While reliable figures are not available, unofficial statistics indicate that less than half of registered voters participated in 1995. By some accounts, turnout in the big cities in 1990 and 1995 was as low as 15 percent, reflecting the alienation of urban voters from electoral politics.

**Conclusion** No one expects that these elections will substantially alter the Egyptian political status quo. Viewed as part of a longer term process, however, the quality of the elections will either contribute to a relaxation of domestic political tension or will reinforce the tight grip that has kept Egyptian civil society in check since the government's

victory over Islamic radicals in the mid-1990s. Even a slight increase in opposition representation in the Assembly, and a marginally cleaner election, would send a signal that Mubarak wants political reform to complement the economic reform of recent years. It remains to be seen whether sending such a signal is high on the government's agenda.

Amy Hawthorne is a 2000–2001 Soref fellow at The Washington Institute.



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