

Egypt's parliamentary elections: Current status and future possibilities

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On Sunday, 5 December 2010, the second and final round of Egypt's parliamentary election was held. This round decided the fate of the seats which had yet to be filled after the first round, which was held on Sunday a week earlier. According to the official results, the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) won more than eighty-three percent of parliamentary seats in a landslide victory; the percentage is expected to increase further when the official NDP members are joined by seventy others who contested the election as independents, in contravention of the party's policies. Meanwhile, opposition parties which had participated in both the first and the second electoral rounds did not win more than fifteen seats. The Muslim Brotherhood did not win a single seat, despite the fact that it had boasted eighty-eight members of parliament in the previous legislature.

This paper will examine this second round of Egypt's parliamentary elections, and will consider the implications of its results for the future of the Egyptian government and its relationship with the opposition forces. This paper will also refer to the challenges that inevitably lie ahead for Egyptian political life.

The electoral scene

The first round of elections resulted in a victory for the ruling NDP in every electoral constituency which had announced its results. That round thus resulted in the NDP capturing more than 200 of the contested seats. Not a single candidate backed by opposition parties – either those enjoying official recognition such as the Wafd Party, the Progressive National Unionist Party (Tagammu) and the Arab Democratic Nasserist Party, or those lacking recognition, such as the Muslim Brotherhood – succeeded in winning any seat in any constituency which had announced its electoral results. Consequently, many observers referred to 'electoral carnage' in every respect and in terms of all relevant criteria. The week between the first and the second rounds of elections witnessed extensive reactions, both inside Egypt and internationally, regarding the manner in which the elections were conducted.

In Egypt, opposition parties – including Tagammu, which is known for the strong links between some of its leaders and the security apparatuses and NDP (as well as the governmental bodies tasked with the duty of monitoring the elections) – levelled accusations of the blatant and widespread tampering of votes. Once it became clear that the NDP leadership and the government did not care about the accusations of vote-rigging, the Wafd Party and the Muslim Brotherhood announced their withdrawal from the second round of elections. Similarly, several independent candidates, most prominent among them being Hamdeen Sabahi, a veteran politician from the Nasserist Party, announced that they would no longer participate. The only significant opposition party which insisted it would participate in the second round of elections was Tagammu – a decision which caused several of its leaders to resign. The NDP, on the other hand, enlisted the support of some of its prominent figures, the state-owned press, and a number of Egyptian intellectuals with links to it, to defend the validity and legitimacy of the outcome of the elections, either through media conferences or through articles in the state-owned media.

Outside Egypt, both Arab and foreign media which covered the elections were unanimous that the poll was characterised by large-scale and systematic electoral fraud, vote-buying, and bribing of election monitors by the ruling party. Consequently, both the European Union and the United States administration issued statements recording their deep concern with the way in which the elections had been carried out. The US response, especially, provoked sharp criticism from official Egyptian sources, though it did not echo the usual pattern of indignant condemnation of the Washington's positions. These Egyptian government reactions were accompanied by the customary official jargon about

Egypt's independent decision-making, and the equally habitual allusion to the dangers posed to Egypt's stability by religious parties – an obvious reference to the Muslim Brotherhood.

The huge fuss that followed the announcement of the results of the first round of elections might have played a direct role in the official Egyptian eagerness to ensure that at least a small number of candidates from other parties would succeed in the second round. This marginal concession, however, failed to improve the general image of the elections. Furthermore, suspicions arose about the party allegiances of the few successful candidates from other parties after the Wafd Party announced that it was freezing the membership of seven candidates who had gone against the party's resolution to boycott the election. The Muslim Brotherhood, in turn, announced that a candidate whose affiliation to the movement had become a basis of debate should, in fact, not be counted as its member. It is likely that Tagammu, with its five parliamentary seats in the People's Assembly, will carry the flag of the opposition in the face of an overwhelming majority of parliamentarians belonging to the NDP, and amid widespread accusations against Tagammu itself of hiding under the government's cloak.

Contributing to the escalation of negative reactions to the elections was the existing widespread belief that the ruling party had no need to resort to tampering with the results. Not one of the parties which participated in the elections, in fact, contested a large number of seats in the People's Assembly, out of a desire on their part not to provoke the ruling party. The Muslim Brotherhood, specifically, had firmly resolved to distance itself as much as possible from the contestation of seats in the Greater Cairo constituency, since this constituency was considered by the political system and the ruling party as the primary political battlefield, both generally and in terms of its specifics. The 2010 parliamentary elections have been regarded as having completely favoured the ruling party, so much so that the NDP, for the first time, indulgently authorised a significant number of seats to be contested by more than one of its candidates. This was done in order to avoid the customarily enforced preference of candidates from notable families and those attached to the centres of political influence, since no one in the country entertained the slightest doubt that the ruling party would, in any event, win a large majority of seats in the next People's Assembly.

This parliamentary election was conducted without any judicial monitoring. Such monitoring had ensured a degree of protection, albeit limited, in the previous election held in 2005. The reason for the lack of judicial monitoring in the recent elections can be traced back to the constitutional amendments that were finalised in 2007, which removed judicial supervision of elections, creating for this purpose, instead, the Higher Electoral Commission, where a limited role was preserved for judges but only in subordinate general committees. In spite of the enactment of these amendments, however, the elections were held while the breadth and scope of authority vested in the Commission could not precisely be identified. The ruling NDP mobilised a huge electoral apparatus, with the financial and other support of the Egyptian state, its executive bodies and its various media. Notwithstanding the fact that before, during and after the first round of parliamentary elections, Egypt's administrative tribunal, which, within the ambit of the State Council, specifically deals with disputes between the state and private citizens, had ruled that the electoral process should be suspended in a substantial number of constituencies, the executive organs of government refused to submit to the rulings issued by the judiciary. These executive bodies argued that parliament was the master of its own processes, and that judicial directives could not challenge parliament's legitimacy. An issue which the ruling party comprehensively failed to confront at these elections was the unprecedented drop in the percentage of voters. Unofficial reports mentioned that voter turnout did not exceed fifteen percent.

Post-election scene

In the wake of the rulings issued by the administrative judiciary, the accusations that had been levelled at the elections, as well as the announcement by the two major opposition parties of their withdrawal from the second round of elections, it was expected that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak would dissolve the newly-elected People's Assembly. This would be followed by a call for fresh elections, out of fear that doubts would be raised concerning the legitimacy of the Assembly under whose auspices elections for the office of president of the republic are scheduled to be held next year. It is unlikely, however, that the president will embark on such a step. This is due to numerous reasons, the first of these being that the Egyptian political system realises that western protests about the legitimacy of their elections are not based on genuine earnestness. Secondly, there are no significant reactions from within the body politic of Egyptian society, and the actions of the opposition forces display a state of confusion and feebleness, or at least a lack of firm resolve to counter the NDP and its government.

It is this disunity concerning the electoral process that had created problems in the ranks of the opposition even prior to the convening of the elections. The forces and personalities who gathered around the person of Mohamed ElBaradei, as well as the Kefaya movement and the Democratic Front Party, urged abstention from the electoral process, while the Wafd Party, the Muslim Brotherhood and Tagammu called for participation. The initial high expectations placed on ElBaradei, and the possibility he had ignited at the time of a political battle, were soon dampened. Such a battle would have involved a shift to a framework capable of uniting the different political forces and personalities of the opposition. However, it has become clear that ElBaradei, who spends considerable periods of time outside the country, will be able neither to confront the political system that has been firmly entrenched by the power of the ruling apparatus, nor to deal effectively with the complexities associated with the Egyptian political arena. The combination of these factors made him vulnerable to and a target of criticism of a sizeable number of role-players in the public sector who had gathered around him at the time the political ban was lifted from the Kefaya movement. The Muslim Brotherhood, the largest opposition group in terms of organisation and grassroots support, still does not view opposition to the ruling system as being either an available or an earnest option. The leading belief within the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood is that the other opposition forces are devoid of any real intrinsic weight, and that they push for confrontation with the system knowing that, at the end of the day, only the Muslim Brotherhood will face the consequences.

The ruling elite, on the other hand, no longer pays much attention either to its reputation or to the extent of the discontent within the ranks of the Egyptian people. One of the reasons behind the self-confidence of the system is the near-total identification of the NDP with the ruling system, and vice versa, as well as the reciprocal relationship between the apparatus of the Egyptian state and the ruling party. This mutual identification has reached such a degree that the organs of the state no longer represent a mere instrument for executing government policies, but have rather begun spontaneously to act to reinforce the system's domination and the hegemony exercised by the NDP over political life. The issue that has been occupying the attention of the system over a number of years, and which continues to be a high priority concern, is that of the successor to President Mubarak. Mubarak is over eighty years of age, and suffers from a string of physical ailments. While one of the most prominent goals pursued by the ruling elites in the latest elections was to get rid of the significant political weight which had been exercised by the Muslim Brotherhood in the previous People's Assembly, it is likely that the issue of Mubarak's successor represented another primary concern, in light of the fact that only

few observers expect him to be in office until the end of the tenure of the next People's Assembly, in five years time.

Results and implications

A calm confidence currently prevails within the ranks of the ruling party that the newly-elected People's Assembly will see out its five-year mandate. However, the possibility of dissolving the Assembly, in the event of an escalation in judicial actions and the issuing of a judgement by the Supreme Constitutional Court proclaiming the Assembly illegitimate, cannot be discounted. Despite this, with regards to major constitutional issues, rulings that are issued by the judiciary are usually not given effect to unless there is strong political will to implement them. Thus, the entire issue reverts to Mubarak, and his decision on the matter takes precedence over that of anyone else. It is significant, however, that a generalised feeling of humiliation has begun to penetrate the judiciary after it was forcefully pushed out of the Higher Electoral Commission in the midst of an electoral process bereft of respectability and legitimacy.

In the event that the crisis related to the elections was to fade away without any additional legal obstacles, the country will move, after only a few months, towards a climate of presidential elections, and will watch with interest what the president's decision shall be. This will be done especially with regards to whether he will put forward his candidature again or whether he will step down from office, either in favour of his son or of another candidate. The general expectation is that Muabarak will strengthen the candidature of his son Gamal, even if the latter does not take over the office of the president immediately after the next presidential elections. The political system will be called upon to hold presidential elections in a suitable form, and to tackle the problem of the wide-ranging disinclination of Egyptians to present themselves at voting stations. When it comes to the Egyptian opposition forces, they are compelled, after recent events, to reorganise their ranks, especially after the newly established leadership of the Wafd Party, cemented by a fond working relationship with the ruling system, has emphasised that the NDP has not made adequate room for it in parliament, resulting in Wafd's withdrawal from the elections. Its current relationship with the system is worse than before. The biggest challenge facing the opposition, therefore, is to move away from its current fragmented condition, to agree on a common driving force – whether such a catalyst will be an individual or a party, and to elaborate a political vision of how to confront the current situation in the country and how to push for change.

At a time when it is difficult to build a broad and coherent opposition front, Egypt's future will be subject, as it has always been the case since the birth of the modern Egyptian state, to the will of the military and security institutions of the state,. This is because such institutions are considered to be the most organised and tightly-knit, and the ones with the most extensive capacity effectively to benefit from the constituent foundations of power.

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