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Elections in the Middle East

What Do They Mean?



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ELECTIONS IN EGYPT: RUMBLINGS FOR CHANGE

MONA MAKRAM-EBEID

The November 2000 parliamentary elections in Egypt were the first to take place in the Arab World after the Warsaw Declaration issued by the Community of Democracies Summit, which took place in June 2000 and to which Egypt was a signatory. Among the most important aspects to analyze were the integrity of the electoral process, the results of a handful of highly charged races, and voter turnout.

Despite its long history, impressive human and material resources and potential role as counterweight to the Executive, the People's Assembly occupies a 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 per cent of the seats) and from doubts about the legality of the 1995 elections, which were the most violent in Egypt's history. The President had pledged repeatedly that the 2000 poll would be free and fair, and he had instructed government agencies involved in the elections to maintain meticulous impartiality. The judicial branch rather than the Interior Ministry appointees were to supervise the voting at every polling station, not just the main stations, as evidence of the 'new spirit' that was to dominate the electoral campaign. Record numbers of young, first time candidates, Copts and women on the ballot were raising hopes for fresh faces in the new assembly. On the other hand critics, mainly in the opposition papers, were arguing that the presence of underlying factors were preventing a truly democratic election. Such factors included Egypt's Emergency Law, which severely restricts candidates' activities, the mistrusted Interior Ministry control over key parts of the electoral process, lack of independent monitoring, and voter apathy. No one expected that the elections would substantially alter the Egyptian political status quo. Viewed as part of a longer term process, however, the quality of the elections was seen either to contribute to a relaxation of domestic political tension or reinforce the tight grip that had kept Egyptian civil society in check since the government's victory over Islamic radicals in the mid-1990s.

Analysts of the political scene saw that even a slight increase in opposition representation in the assembly and a marginally cleaner election would send a signal that the President wanted political reform to complement the economic reform of recent years. It is against this background that we will go through the election results.

Let me start by stating a few points. **First**, this year's events, in which Egyptians voted out some ruling party stalwarts and the Muslim Brotherhood scored its largest victory since 1987, was hailed as the 'elections of the millennium.' They certainly marked a distinct improvement over the flawed 1995 contest, although overwhelming ruling party control of Parliament was preserved—but perhaps not as easily as in the past.

Second, the elections opened at a time when widespread anger about the Palestinian Intifada was raging, creating explosive pressure on the regime. Much of the victory scored by the Muslim Brotherhood can be attributed to outraged public sentiment, as they were the best poised to benefit from the crisis.

Third, results have shown the increasing importance of public opinion in this part of the world, underlining the fact that sustained regional violence such as the upsurge of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict can have a devastating impact on domestic policies, and particularly that the al-Aqsa Mosque event managed to transform the Israeli Palestinian dispute from a political conflict into a religious one.

Election Results: Outlook

Egypt appears at first glance to have a robust multiparty system. For the past 25 years, parties have competed for seats through the People's Assembly, and there are currently 16 legal political parties (only eight of them fielded candidates). Behind that image, however, as it was proven in those elections, the picture emerges of a largely contrived multiparty system.¹

The new parliament's 444 elected seats (10 more seats are allotted to presidential appointees) are distributed as follows: the ruling NDP controls 388 seats comprised of 175 seats won by official NDP candidates and 213

¹ Mona Makram-Ebeid, "Political Opposition in Egypt: Democratic Myth or Reality?" *Middle East Journal* 43:3 (summer 1989); Ann Lesch, "Egypt" in Gabriel Almond et al, eds., *Comparative Politics Today* (Addison, Wesley, Longman, 1999).

by 'independents' who switched to the NDP upon victory; Islamist MPs, including 17 Muslim Brotherhood affiliates, hold 19 seats; seven members of the liberal Wafd party; six members of the leftist Tagammu', two members of the Democratic Nasserist Party and five members of breakaway Nasserist factions, one for the Liberal party (right) and 14 seats, for as yet unaffiliated, independents. Three Copts and 11 women also have seats. In short the government looked set to control 400 seats as opposed to 388 in the former parliament.

Independents

With some 3,000 NDP members running as independents and the ruling party fielding a full ticket of 444 official candidates, the Arabic language press dubbed the current campaign as one in which "the NDP is running against the NDP,"² basically a repeat of the 1995 elections except for the fact that this time even more NDP members were running against their party's official list. In fact, the 213 winning independents, most of whom (80 per cent) were NDP members rejected from 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 they were the key to ultimate NDP dominance. Immediately after winning, thanks to solid local connections, they rejoined the ruling party, which, having lost many of its previously held seats was only too willing to reintegrate them. However, 14 'true'³ independents decided to keep their status as independents and refused to join any political group.

² See *al-Mussawir*.

³ One of the most prominent 'true' independents was businessman Rami Lakah (36). Capitalizing on his prominent profile and well known wealth he attempted to garner political weight through an established political party. Both the Green Party and the Nasserists, equally in dire need of funds, were courted by Lakah but negotiations proved fruitless. He later rallied the support of more than 20 independent deputies to form a bloc capable of acting as the largest opposition group in the Assembly. (Wafdist Ayman Nour, who was not on good terms with his party chairman, was said to sympathize with such a formation). Lakah's eligibility to run in parliamentary elections had earlier on been contested on the grounds that he holds both French and Egyptian citizenship. Although he lost his counter appeal in court, it proved irrelevant since the ruling came after he had been sworn in in parliament.

Copts

Although the Coptic community comprises about 10 per cent of the population,⁴ Copts spread their votes among several parties and their candidates are rarely elected. They usually rely on the president to select approximately four to five among the ten MPs that he is authorized to appoint to the assembly as a form of cooptation, which some Copts resent since it means that those MPs do not represent the people's will but serve at the government's pleasure.

For the first time since the 1952 Revolution, three Copts have garnered seats by election. Although the number is quite modest compared with the 75 Copts who contested elections in 2000, it nevertheless reflects a growing tendency on the part of Copts to shun their 'traditional apathy' and be more involved in the political process. During the 1995 parliamentary elections there were only 57 Coptic candidates, none of whom was nominated by the ruling NDP. This time around, amidst much talk about the need for Copts to become more politically engaged, the NDP fielded three Coptic candidates. Only one NDP Coptic candidate won: the Minister of Economy, Youssef B'outros Ghali. Unsurprisingly, the modest number of Coptic NDP candidates was viewed by many as extremely disappointing.

However, Copts fared better on the lists of opposition parties. The Wafd, for instance, fielded 12 Coptic candidates. More surprisingly, the Islamist-oriented (and presently suspended) Labor Party had nine Coptic candidates, all running as independents. The leftist Tagammu' had four, the Green party three, and al-Wifak and al-Takaful, two each. Most of them ran as independents, and those representing political parties accounted for a mere 21. The majority of Coptic candidates were businessmen.

The Coptic Orthodox Church does not openly give its support to Coptic candidates in order not to arouse the ire of their opponents. Its assistance is confined to encourage Copts to vote. The most prominent Coptic Wafd party candidate was Mounir Abdel-Nour in Cairo's al-Wayli district. Although he faced strong competition from his NDP opponent who had

⁴ Nearly 90 per cent of the population are Muslim by religion, a gradual process of conversion from Christianity having taken place since the seventh century AD. Copts comprise most of the Christian community.

defeated him in the 1995 parliamentary elections, his success was warmly hailed by both Muslims and Copts.⁵ The other Christian to be elected was independent businessman Rami Lakah.

Women

Since 1956, when Egyptian women gained the right to vote, only 64 women have served in parliament. Their number has traditionally ranged between two and three per cent. The only exception came in the 1979 and 1984 parliaments when the figures jumped to 8.9 and 7.86 per cent respectively. Not coincidentally a law instituted in 1979 designated specific seats for women (30), but in 1986 the procedure was annulled on the grounds that it was discriminatory. However, because the electoral system was based on proportional representation women managed to garner 6.6 per cent of the seats in the 1987 elections.

The number of women candidates has increased this year. Out of 120, compared with 87 in 1995, political parties fielded 25, compared with 21 in 1995. This means that the majority were independents who lacked the support of parties.

To explain—if not excuse—the blatant dismissal by political parties of the other half of the electorate the same old chicken and egg logic was used: the argument goes that women are a liability on a party list. Opposition parties feel that if their candidates stand little chances of winning, women stand even less. To risk naming a woman, that same reasoning goes, is effectively to give up a potential seat on an already limited list. But why is that so? The traditional answer is that “politics is a man’s business” and hence voters prefer men, as society has not yet acknowledged women’s effectiveness and capability as decision-makers and legislators.

Traditionally, the majority of both men and women who were elected were members of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). The NDP did sustain a lead this time, but there was a noticeable shift in favor of women independents—even at the expense of some icons of the ruling party.⁶ The star of the elections was Nariman al-Daramalli, an independent

⁵ See Mohamed Sid Ahmed in *al-Hayat*, November 2000.

⁶ Both Thoraya Labna and Galila Awad, who had served several terms as NDP MPs, lost.

who ran in the Upper Egyptian constituency of Tema in the governorate of Sohag. Ignoring the popular belief that the Egyptian countryside and the South in particular is politically conservative and hence less inclined to vote for women, she managed to garner a comfortable 25,000 vote majority,⁷ 15,000 votes more than her opponent from the ruling NDP, placing her return among the highest garnered in the electoral constituencies (222 constituencies).

Interestingly, the majority of the seven women winners came from outside the metropolis, which suggests that the determining factor in voting is not necessarily political affiliation or gender but more particularly a candidate's ability to engage in grassroots work.

Despite the disappointment expressed by many across the political spectrum⁸ that only 23 women were nominated in official party lists, this increase and the institutional support provided by the newly formed National Council for Women (NCW) as well as a general political movement in favor of inclusiveness, all helped to ensure that seven women won seats, up from five in the 1995 elections.⁹

While this increase is far from being huge, it represents the highest number of women MPs to have won elections to the People's Assembly since the abrogation of the 1979 law that designated a specific number (30) of parliamentary seats for women. The change that was really significant, though, is the caliber of the new female candidates who broke new ground in this election by running in constituencies generally perceived as 'tough' and therefore requiring male candidates.¹⁰

Observations and Concluding Remarks

Almost a quarter of a century after the multiparty system was adopted in 1976, opposition parties remain "parties without followers for people

⁷ The speaker of the House won his seat by a mere 6,000 votes.

⁸ See *al-Hayat*, November 17, 2000. The NDP nominated 11, the Wafd eight, Tagammu' four, the Green Party three, and the Liberal Party (which had frozen its activities since 1997) had seven women running on its slate. One of the surprises of these elections was the candidacy of a woman belonging to the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, Jihan al-Halafawi, the wife of a leading Brotherhood figure.

⁹ The President has appointed four more women, bringing their total number to eleven.

¹⁰ See *Rose al-Youssef*, September 2-8, 2000.

without parties.”¹¹ The fact that the electorate chose to vote for individuals and not parties reflects a lack of trust in all political parties, partly due to the opposition parties’ dismal performance in the outgoing parliament, where they gave the impression of having been tamed by the government, and hence were not seen as fundamental agents of political change and modernization. On the other hand, the judiciary has replaced the opposition in many of the tasks it should have undertaken to enhance democratization and political participation. The historic court ruling which forced the government to place the elections under full judicial supervision, whereas the opposition’s struggle for the same objective yielded no such results, is a case in point.

There is no doubt that these elections were freer and had a larger turnout than any previous elections in the last decade. Judicial supervision, extended for the first time to subsidiary polling stations, renewed voter confidence in the worth of their ballot. They went after the NDP, and that seemed to be the extent of what the level of development of political life in the country would allow for the time being. Punishing the ruling party by a ‘punitive vote’ was the one identifying feature of the 2000 elections. People voted for ‘NDP independents,’ the Muslim Brotherhood and some unlikely opposition candidates: they did not, as far as possible, vote for the official ruling party ticket.

Politics is the main loser this time around. Village loyalties have prevailed systematically over all considerations. One theory holds that the election results conform to the widespread distrust of politicians (rather than politics) in Egypt as a result of the state’s long fight against free and independent political expression since 1952. The emergence of an apolitical society is thus seen as the outcome of a long legacy of a specific brand of populist benevolent authoritarianism. Hence, the election of candidates was not the result of political preferences and, on the whole, the campaign was marked by a striking lack of political debate beyond the Palestinian issue. In fact the contraction of politics in the elections, in parliament and the country as a whole has corresponded to a growing scramble over parliamentary seats, expressed both in the number of candidates contesting the elections and the fierceness of the competition and suggesting that, in this age of

¹¹ Quoted from *al-Hayat*, November 19, 2000.

economic liberalization, parliament is increasingly becoming a site of business rather than politics with electoral contests becoming an extension of competition in the market place rather than in the political sphere. 42 per cent of the NDP list were new faces. Notable among these were 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. 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 patronage rather than to mobilize support for any broader ideology. Also 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.

Patronage relations and 'tribal' loyalties have overwhelmingly determined voter behavior, and this has taken place in a highly class-stratified society where actual 'tribes' are virtually non-existent. According to many observers, the greatest problem seems to lie with the failure of political regimes to accommodate civil society organizations that would provide an alternative to tribalism. Moreover restrictions on the foundation of civil and political groups have disproportionately hampered secular liberal movements, while leaving loopholes for religious groups who have a distinct advantage through their access to mosques and their strong engagement in grassroots work. Furthermore, restriction on the establishment of civil associations in itself prevents a pluralistic political culture from evolving.

Looking at the democratic process as it unfolds does not give much evidence that opposition parties are agents for democratic change or that there is more active participation of the citizens. This not to say that opposition politics is meaningless, but the working conditions for the opposition and the little maneuvering space conceded to them by ruling parties and the government cannot be called conducive for leadership roles in the national democratization process. Moreover, without access to power patronage at the grassroots level, opposition parties have little prospect of developing broad based movements to challenge the NDP's control. Even

though they field candidates and publish newspapers they did not manage to gain the kind of grassroots following that would enable them to have a solid presence in the political arena.

On the other hand, the Muslim Brotherhood, outlawed, hounded and battered to the very doors of the polling stations, proved that they remain the country's only real political 'party.' Their success has prompted calls for the government to resolve the ironic situation of an illegal group winning the second largest number of votes after the ruling party—all despite a security clampdown.

However, the Brotherhood's performance, although impressive, should not be blown out of proportion. They exist as a trend and enjoy good organizational capabilities, but their success should not lead us to think that they have heavy political leverage with the masses. In his study on the 1995 political elections, the prominent sociologist Saad Eddin Ibrahim estimated that, in an ideal situation, the Islamists would garner 15 per cent of the votes, i.e. 68 seats out of the 444 contested. In other words, the fact that people voted for them does not at all indicate a transformation in the electorate's sympathies, but more a rejection of the present parties.

Can one say that this is a return of the Muslim Brothers? As in the past, this year's 72 Brotherhood candidates ran as independents, since the organization is illegal. Despite a harsh crackdown that began that summer and continued through the elections, they managed to win 17 seats. Although these results are surprising, 17 should not be blown out of proportion and calling their performance 'impressive' and 'remarkable' may be something of an overstatement.

First, reports suggest that their strong showing in stage one (winning six seats) was not anticipated, but the government made a decision not to interfere. These victories were partly due to the fact that they were best poised to benefit from the widespread anger about the Palestinian crisis which raged as the elections opened. In stage two, they were left to gain nine more seats partly as a safety valve for frustration directed at the regime's failure to take a harder line against Israel. However, by stage three—which included the Brotherhood stronghold of Giza—the game had changed. They and their 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 of them won a seat), was not its strongest ever. In the 1987 elections it won 36 seats through an alliance with the Labor and Liberal parties.

Third, and according to several analysts,¹² while the crackdown benefited the Brotherhood candidates by generating voter sympathy, it may have hurt the organization parliamentary influence in the long run (as the authorities might have bet on). With most top figures behind bars, only second tier Brothers were elected, threatening to limit their effectiveness within parliament.

There is no doubt that Muslim Brotherhood regime relations are one of the most important dynamics to watch. It is highly unlikely that a shift in favor of the Brotherhood will take place in its relationship with the state. Evidence however suggests that the Brotherhood will pursue their quest to establish a political party. Hence there are two possible scenarios: in the first, arbitrary arrests of Brotherhood members will continue and a siege will be imposed on all their activities. However, in a best case scenario the government will accept the legality gained by the Brotherhood through the ballot and allow them to act through legal channels because they are part of the legislative body. But this will not happen 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.¹³

Concerning voter turnout, there was a definite improvement in 2000. The apathy of the Egyptian electorate has been a hallmark of many past

¹² See Amy Hawthorne in *Policy Watch 2000* (Washington DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy).

¹³ It is interesting to note that 10 out of 19 Brotherhood members have joined the Committee of Education, where their main plan is to confront the state. Furthermore, they have mounted a campaign inside parliament against the minister of culture for having allowed the publication of three novels said to contain obscene material. The minister subsequently removed from office a number of major intellectuals heading the ministry's General Organization for Cultural Palaces. The move caused uproar amongst the Egyptian intelligentsia, who estimated that the move was a major concession to religious fundamentalism. Targeting intellectuals was seen as another way of attacking the political system without really clashing with the government, and in fact implicitly suggesting a new alliance between Islamists and the government. *Sawt al-Umma*, January 17, 2001.

elections. While reliable figures are not available, unofficial statistics indicate that less than half the registered voters participated in 1995. By some accounts, the turnout in the big cities in 1990 and 1995 was as low as 15 per cent, reflecting the alienation of urban voters from electoral politics.

Although the NDP, as in the past, managed to win more than three quarters of the seats, thus guaranteeing itself the two thirds needed to select the Speaker, dominate committees, pass vital legislation and nominate the president, its share of 87 per cent marked a substantial decline from previous years. This means that the NDP does not have the same control as it had in previous parliaments, which enabled it to spring legislation upon the assembly and pass what it wanted without taking into consideration opposition parties' views. It is true that the opposition will find it difficult to stop controversial laws, but they can still use their limited members¹⁴ to some effect by interpellating government officials and ministers and raising sensitive issues such as the trial of civilians before military courts. Judging by the composition of the opposition, debates in parliament promise to be more exciting than they have been for many years. Even though the House's fundamental nature is not about to change, something new is afoot: change is in the air. The state should clearly get the message: the public demands significant reform.

The NDP's heavy defeats have certainly embarrassed the regime, but they do not signal the imminent demise of the party. Those 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, have called for.¹⁵

As for the integrity of the electoral process, July's court ruling, while an especially important step, has not itself ensured a totally impartial election administration. The judicial branch, charged with supervising the voting, included 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

¹⁴ Apart from the 17 Brotherhood members there are two independent Islamists, 16 opposition party members, five independent Nasserists and 14 'true' independents who refused to join the NDP. *Al-Hayat*, November 16, 2000.

¹⁵ See *Rose al-Youssef*.

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.

It is clear that people have not yet grown accustomed to judicial control and integrity. Indeed, the fairness of the elections has surprised everyone, most of all politicized, independent-thinking candidates and potential candidates. In fact, some analysts have argued that these elections have led to the emergence of voters as the only political protagonists capable of putting political reform on fast track. Against this background, it seems safe to predict that people will go through a learning process and act consequently. The 2000 elections are bound eventually to change the voting pattern. Learning through the democratic process is a key to democratization and not the other way round. In other words, people can bring about democracy through practice. Perhaps one day the NDP will be able to recruit members who take an interest in their constituencies. In the meantime, unless there is a thorough purge of the 'old guard,' mostly responsible for the heavy losses meted out by the ruling NDP, in favor of new blood, as well as thorough 'house cleaning,' the prediction of the Muslim Brotherhood Supreme Guide, Mustapha Mashhour, on the eve of the elections that "in 30 years, the Brotherhood will come to power,"¹⁶ might very well prove to be true.

¹⁶ See *al-Hayat*, November 19, 2000.