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# Elections in the Middle East

What Do They Mean?



Edited by  
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# THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF YEAR 2000 IN EGYPT: A LESSON IN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION<sup>1</sup>

ASSIA BOUTALEB

## An Anthropological Perspective on Elections

To begin, let us recall that the Egyptian parliamentary elections of year 2000 ended with the expected victory of the incumbent National Democratic Party (NDP) that kept an absolute majority of seats in the new People's Assembly. With its 388 elected members, the ruling party left the opposition a mere 35 seats out of the 434 contested.<sup>2</sup>

One can readily agree on the fact that the outcome of these elections came as no surprise and left one with mixed feelings. We can add also that their results do not leave one optimistic with regard to the advancement of democratization. But nevertheless, the interesting point in these elections is precisely that they have pointed to trends rather than establishing them, that from an analytical point of view the dynamics of their unfolding was of greater significance than their outcome per se. As is often the case with elections, what came before voting day proved more noteworthy than what followed it.

In order to bring to light in as dynamic a perspective as possible some of the stakes involved in elections, in this contribution I focus on the year 2000 election campaign in Egypt and I offer an anthropological reading of the electoral process.

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<sup>1</sup>I am most grateful to Normand Rossignol for his translation, for having been so patient with the changes I often made and for his professionalism. I also want to thank François Ireton for his reading of this article and for his comments, which are as always very stimulating and useful. All my gratitude and thanks to Sandrine Gambin who gave me the opportunity to participate in this symposium and whose careful and demanding reading of a first version of the text was very useful. Last but not least, very special thanks to my mother who gave me the great pleasure of being at my side during the preparation and presentation of this article.

<sup>2</sup>According to the country's Constitution, 10 MPs are selected by the President of the Republic himself. In total, the Lower House holds 444 seats.

These elections were the first to come under effective judicial supervision, a fact that affected not only their outcome but also the unfolding of the electoral process itself. The main claim or argument I will make here is that these elections can be viewed as marking the beginning of a learning process regarding elections per se, but also, and in a more general sense, political participation. This process took place particularly through the opening-up of the elections, in the sense that they involved, interested, and concerned an increasing number of individuals. And this is probably the most significant impact judicial supervision has had on the 2000 elections.

In the first part of this study, I will explore voters' attitude towards the elections and their gradual involvement in the electoral process. Learning what running for a seat is and implies will take up the second part. I will show that the rise in the number of candidates had an undeniable impact on the election campaign and on the terms of the electoral battle. Indeed a significant number of individuals had a first-hand experience of political participation and learned what it meant in terms of means and resources. Finally, let us note that this process also prompted the vigorous growth of an electoral economy.

### **Making the Event: Voters Learning 'From Above' and 'From Below'**

The parliamentary elections of year 2000 may be viewed as an instance of mobilization 'from above' and as an opportunity for the people in general to learn about the electoral process also 'from below.'

**State rhetoric, or a lesson from above.** Let me start by recalling the fact that it took a while before Egyptians became interested in these elections. One of the reasons was the events unfolding in Palestine at the time, which for a while overshadowed the electoral process and captured public opinion. One could see at the time that well before the Egyptian people took a genuine interest in them, the elections were widely covered by the media, prime among which was television. Besides the usual political programs and those made especially for the elections, there was an increase

in the airing of advertisements or brief informational spots promoting participation and voter registration.

One of the most interesting aspects of these advertisements or spots was their educational purpose. One of them featured men and women of different social backgrounds and geographical origins heading towards a ballot box in an orderly fashion in order to cast their vote. Another one showed a young man entering a voting booth with many ballot papers, and then exiting the booth after having made his choice, and finally casting his vote. These spots would end with this very straightforward message: "Show awareness and responsibility regarding who you choose to represent you at the People's Assembly."

And so the aim of these advertisements and spots was educational in at least two ways: providing information on the electoral process and thus contributing to the growth and strengthening of a civic culture. Also for the incumbent regime, this would be achieved by explaining and promoting the act of voting itself with an emphasis on the symbols of national unity and consensus.

Moreover, during the same period the daily 15-minute program "People and Politics"<sup>3</sup> would relay the comments of ordinary citizens and of some of the election candidates (actually mostly female candidates, a fact that also served to show the President's willingness and capacity to promote the participation of women in public affairs). Generally speaking, the picture offered to viewers was rather ideal: all those surveyed voiced their determination to vote, their belief in the significance of this event in their life, and their interest in national politics. But we know reality to be rather different.<sup>4</sup> Occasionally, a few differing views were aired during the show, thereby bringing a welcome sense of credibility to what would have otherwise seemed like an overly enthusiastic perspective on the elections. For example, one youth mentioned that "anyway, the candidates are old and

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<sup>3</sup> Literally, the title would be "the political street," an expression which in Egypt refers to the people. In a more political sense, "the Egyptian street" means public opinion.

<sup>4</sup> Although there is no totally reliable data regarding voter turnout, most studies indicate an urban turnout no higher than 15 per cent and a rural one revolving around 20 per cent. See *Intikhabat Majlis al-Sha'b 1995* (People's Assembly Elections, 1995), al-Mahroussa Center, 1996; *Al-Intikhabat al-Parlamaniyya 1990* (Parliamentary Elections), al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 1991.

none of them really represents him.”<sup>5</sup> Another instance was a female student who described the hardships inherent to voter registration and openly conveyed her feeling of discouragement. And yet most of the people surveyed provided a standard view of the ideal representative: honest, patriotic, fair, concerned with providing for the needs of his constituents, and aware of and familiar with their problems. But the relevance of such a profile could not hide the fact that it is very uncommon in reality, which went to show the hollowness or the ready-made sense of the people’s comments and of the message that the program sent out.

**Making out the rules of the game.** Furthermore, another point worth mentioning is the fact that people learned more about the relevance of elections by following the unfolding of the election campaign itself than through listening to what the mainstream media and state officials had to say about them. During the election campaign, and as one voting date followed another, one could feel a growing tension among the voters. Indeed the successive rounds of the voting schedule created a ‘snowball’ effect with regard to public interest, and thus to the mobilization of candidates and voters.

Here, in a nutshell, is how the process actually evolved: the unfolding and outcome of the first round would affect the style and content of the speeches and arguments of the candidates running for the next round, and so on and so forth. The real impetus of these elections came from the unfolding and outcome of the first round, which came as proof that the President had kept his word regarding his promise of an orderly and transparent electoral process. When people could see that judicial supervision was for real, that a number of prominent NDP members had not been reelected, and that others, prime among whom were six Muslim Brotherhood candidates, could actually win, then the election campaign gained momentum. But the main reason is that at one point people realized that the vote could really be kept secret and that the voting booth no longer served as mere ornament, and indeed had actually become part of the standard and mandatory voting procedure. They found out these two facts simply by following the

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the average age of politicians in general is around 60 years old.

evolution of the previous rounds and by listening to the stories of voters from other governorates.

As could be expected, the effort put into meeting all the legal provisions concerning voting procedures extended delays and had a limiting effect on the number of votes actually cast. There were many tales of voters unable to cast their ballot for lack of time and due to long line-ups outside polling stations. And so for the average citizen the whole experience brought to light the realities and effects of individual and secret voting as well as its consequences with regard to organization. During the previous elections, 'holdups' at the door of polling stations were uncommon due to the practice of group voting and low voter turnout.

Besides its educational effect on voters, the presence of judges inside polling stations also had an impact on how and where election rigging took place: regarding the year 2000 elections, it was outside polling stations and during the period prior to vote-casting per se that candidates would try to influence the outcome of the poll to their own benefit. The major stakes had then shifted and now had to do mostly with the drawing-up of voter lists and controlling access to polling stations. However that may be, the interesting point here is that these elections, for one thing, marked the birth of an initiative geared towards voting education, towards learning about the requirements of individual voting. And for another, and in a more general sense, the last Egyptian parliamentary elections definitely comprised elements of electoral education that one can hardly consider as insignificant. At this point in time, the emergence of the individualized and effective voter may still remain a remote prospect, but there are signs possibly pointing in that direction and there is no foregone conclusion as to future developments.

**Learning through participation.** An additional feature of these elections was the high number of candidates compared with previous polls, but we will discuss the ins and outs of this issue in a later part. For now, let us proceed forward by noting that quite understandably this increase prompted a rise in the number of individuals involved in the electoral process, whether linked to its organizational aspects or to liven up election campaigns and political meetings in the different neighborhoods. Candidates who had the financial and social capital needed were able to enroll many aides during their public performances. And this support, if only from a

logistics point of view, was indeed required since these public stunts were many and of various types: popular gatherings, conferences, meetings, travels, visits, inaugurations, religious and national celebrations, and also offering wishes and condolences.

Instead of making general statements on the election campaign from a macro-perspective, I chose to focus here on the campaign led by two candidates in particular. The first, an independent in 'Abdin, organized many popular gatherings, while the second, a female Tagammu' member in Qasr al-Nil, set up mostly *masira-s* (gathering-processions). It is worth mentioning that the type of campaign led by a candidate is mostly determined by the resources that he or she is able to mobilize, but also by the nature of his or her relations with the authorities and police force. However that may be, let us note that organizing a meeting or a *masira* requires mobilizing many individuals. Besides the conventional presence of elected locals, *shiyakha* leaders and other notables of the district, another type of actors is just as present and visible, namely the youth. Hired as audience liven-uppers rather than organizers, as underlings instead of decision-makers, these young people make up the helping hands of election campaigns. Each candidate would resort to them following a radiant network pattern. This allowed for a relatively wide meshing and covering of the district. While it is difficult to identify the modalities and terms commanding the recruitment procedure, it is most probable that these youths participated in exchange for tangible returns, as various in nature as they may have been. They helped in different ways: handing out pamphlets, putting up banners and posters, surrounding the candidates during election tours, giving them people's feedback on their campaign speeches, livening up meetings, etc. Some among the more experienced and who were better known to the candidates were charged with supervising the voters lists and overlooking the unfolding of the electoral process at the doors of the different polling stations. This usually created unrest on voting day: in the best case scenario, the supporters of rival candidates gathered to discuss the comparative advantages of their support and the gains it brought them; in the worst of cases, their differences with regard to who they supported could revive resentments and lead to violent clashes.

This participation of the youth, as gain-motivated as it may have been, was an opportunity for them to acquire a better knowledge of politics, and



also developed their capacity to make out the power struggles inherent in elections. But one must remain cautious and not overestimate the impact of election campaigns on those who take part in them. This is because, on the one hand, the total number of votes in Egypt is far from reflecting the amount of people actually mobilized; and, on the other hand, one cannot infer, indeed assume the existence of political stances among the youth from knowing whom they support on the ground. In most cases, in fact, we are dealing with an apolitical participation rather than a militant or ideologically based support.

However, despite people's occasional confusion as to the actual category<sup>6</sup> and political affiliations of the candidates, their knowledge of the networks and political friendships and enmities is often remarkable, in both senses of the term. The political apathy that is generally (and probably a little too quickly) attributed to Egyptians stems less from a lack of political awareness or skills than from a chronic mistrust of the political system *per se*.<sup>7</sup> Will or can judicial supervision do away with this apprehensive stance towards the official political scene? For sure, any significant change regarding this matter can only come in the long term. But nevertheless, judicial supervision remains an important issue that may shape future political developments, if only due to its potential impact on effective political participation.

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<sup>6</sup> Article 87 of the Egyptian Constitution stipulates that half the seats contested must go to candidates belonging to the category of peasants (*fellah*) or workers (*'ummal*), as opposed to that of *fi'at* (a term that refers to the other social categories). This requirement, a legacy of the Nasser era, seeks to ensure parliamentary representation for all. But it is coming under growing criticism due to abuses in categorizing and its instrumentalization by the candidates.

<sup>7</sup> As is clearly shown in a localized and detailed study on electoral processes at the village level in particular, see Samer al-Karanshawy, "Class, Family and Power in an Egyptian Village," *Cairo Papers in Social Science*, 20(1), 1997. And for a similar study, but one focuses on a specific neighborhood, see Ahmed Maseeh Felli Youssef, Elisabeth Longuenesse, "Affaires et politique au Caire. L'exemple du quartier de Sayyida Zeinab," *Maghreb/Machrek*, 166, October-December 1999.

## The Election Campaign: A Painful Learning Process for Candidates

Let me now turn to another category of individuals who during the elections were also involved in a learning process, namely the political candidates. Indeed, as was mentioned earlier, one salient feature of the last elections was the record number of candidates running for a seat.<sup>8</sup> Before examining the consequences of this phenomenon, let us attempt to determine its main causes.

**A significant rise in the number of candidates.** It is a fact that the exponential growth in the number of candidates was due to the large number of individuals running under the independent label, actually making up close to 80 per cent of the total of those contesting seats. The independents have become a structural feature of the Egyptian political scene. However, it is not a new phenomenon, and it is inherent to the multiparty system that prevails in Egypt. It serves to highlight the personalization of politics and the frail, indeed hollow, nature of party membership.

Once elected, independents would massively join the ranks of the ruling NDP. Of course, the party of government enjoys a number of enticing advantages, but the trend is rather explained by the fact that most independents stemmed from and were members of the NDP in the first place. In this sense, the term 'independent' should not be taken too literally.

In fact, the independents make up a variegated bunch or 'nebula'<sup>9</sup> that brings together different profiles and that serves different strategies. Part of this heterogeneous whole may be viewed as an appendix of the ruling NDP that includes members 'punished' by the party and thus not chosen to run under its banner,<sup>10</sup> candidates that are put to the test in some districts, and

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<sup>8</sup> More than 4,200 candidates, or an increase of 35 per cent compared with the 1990 elections. To give a better idea of what statistics can reveal (or conceal), let us mention only that in 10 governorates there were 11 or 12 candidates competing for the same seat, and that in the others the number was eight to 10 candidates.

<sup>9</sup> The term is borrowed from the subtitle of Iman Farag's article, "Les législatives égyptiennes ou la politique entre clientélisme et citoyenneté," *Egypte/Monde Arabe*, 4, 1990, p. 157.

<sup>10</sup> This was notably because of their involvement in corruption cases, as was with Tewfiq Zaghoul, deputy of al-Santa (Gharbiyya governorate), or due to their public opposition to some government policies, as was the case for Mohamed Khalil

also candidates wanting to join the party's ranks in a position of strength following their electoral victory.<sup>11</sup> Thus, besides their differences, what they have in common is their use of the party as a reference point, indeed as a stepping stone in their careers. Apart from these 'NDP-independents,' as the papers dubbed them, some candidates were 'genuine' independents in the sense that they labeled themselves as such since they were unable to find in the political landscape a party that represented what they stood for. Thus, the restrictive law concerning the forming of political parties comes as one of the significant factors explaining the independents phenomenon. Last but not least, an additional component of this nebula was one more directly linked to the setting of the elections: it was made up of the 75 Muslim Brotherhood candidates who joined the independents due to the outlawing of the Labor Party.<sup>12</sup> And so the 'independent' label actually covers those who were either disappointed, excluded or marginalized from the official political scene, but also the ambitious, the opportunists whose 'independence' was rather temporary and often simply a phase preceding cooptation, a tactfully bargained integration. Many of them were strong and influential personalities known and respected in the social sphere. In the end, we can say that the growing trend of independent candidates actually highlights the dysfunctions, weaknesses, and gaps proper to the official political realm.

But let us now return to the tangible, indeed observable consequences of the increasing number of election candidates. This new situation prompted obvious abuses and outbidding matches between candidates, but it

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Qiwita, deputy of Faraksur (Damietta governorate) known for his Nasserite affinities and anti-privatization stance. In total, it is estimated that 186 party members were excluded from the lists for the 2000 elections; see *al-Musawwar*, September 22, 2000. Otherwise, it is worth mentioning that most of the trials against NDP candidates for their double nationality were launched by candidates actually belonging to this category of NDP-independents.

<sup>11</sup> Here the Abdin candidate whose campaign I followed is a perfect case in point: while the NDP favored supporting the district's incumbent MP, our Abdin candidate was, on the one hand, very active and present in the area, and on the other hand he spared the party and actually picked up many of its themes and arguments throughout his campaign and during his political meetings.

<sup>12</sup> A party which serves partly as the institutional channel of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood since 1987.

mostly led to serious gaps from one candidate to another with regard to the type and content of the election campaign he led.

**The terms of competition.** The candidates' major concern was to get to be known by the voters. In some districts there were 15 candidates running for election, most of them unknown to the locals. And so the main idea at the very least was for one's name to become recognized by people, even if one relied on only very limited resources.<sup>13</sup> This explains both the increase in the number of campaign banners and the qualitative change in terms of what they read. One could see at the time that at one point all references to the candidate's program or party disappeared in favor of slogans that were either more vague or more narrowly focused on the candidate's personal traits. Some would put forward their charitable deeds, while others emphasized their personal qualities and good morals. And so the exponential increase in the number of candidates led to the depoliticization of election campaign slogans and arguments. Most were worded in terms that were as vague as they were general: "My program: to be close to the people;"<sup>14</sup> "Voice your support for the one whose voice is heard;" "Vote for the one who tells the truth;" "The right man in the right place;" or still "Yes to the one who looks to the future."<sup>15</sup>

More than the shallowness or bombastic style of their wording, both shape and content of campaign slogans and banners indicated the personalization, the individualization of campaign strategies and of the arguments put forth during the electoral battle. While the higher number of election candidates did create some confusion, it actually served to highlight the real motives behind voting in Egypt: the vote is for a person rather than for a party or an electoral platform; in the best case, support goes to someone who provides services, while in the worst case people vote for the lesser evil. Thus the 2000 elections have clearly and bluntly shown the real stakes behind voting.

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<sup>13</sup> In some cases, it was on voting day itself that new names appeared; there was a kind of instant 'springing up' of new candidates.

<sup>14</sup> *Al-Ahram*, October 4, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> These are only a few examples. For a more exhaustive coverage, see the page focusing on the wording of campaign banners, *al-Ahram*, November 30, 2000.

For some candidates, the election campaign had kicked off back at the end of 1995, after they had failed to win a seat in the parliamentary elections of that year. The strategy was to show up in the district on a regular basis, according to candidates' resources and to means suited to each district. For example, let us mention the case of Mustafpha Bakri and Rami Lakah. In Helwan, where most of the people come from Upper Egypt, Bakri would emphasize his *sa'idi* origins and the considerable amount of attention the newspaper he headed devoted to regional issues. As for Lakah, a successful businessman, he would put forward his own experience when visiting the merchants of al-Ezbekkiya, while he relied on his financial resources when meeting with people in general.

**A flourishing electoral economy.** This leads me to discuss another major aspect of the last elections, and that is the incredible spending that went on during the election campaign and the huge amounts involved. The total cost of the campaign is estimated to have reached about three billion Egyptian pounds, so much so that it was dubbed the "war of wallets" and the "battle of the big fish."<sup>16</sup> The total value of liberalities, gifts and other offerings reached unprecedented levels, sometimes even to the astonishment of voters otherwise used to the generosity of candidates riding the campaign trail. In this sense, the case of the NDP candidate in Shubra handing out meat and donating carpets to every mosque and church in the district was in no way exceptional. The outbidding also concerned vote-buying: in a number of districts, the price to pay to buy a vote, which is usually LE25, could reach up to LE150 on voting day. It is estimated that on average the candidates spent from three to five million Egyptian pounds each on buying votes.<sup>17</sup> In order to ensure that their money was well spent, some candidates would pay in two installments. Without falling into easy historical analogy, one can only recognize that Tewfiq Hakim's realistic comment made during the 1938 elections holds as true today as it did back then:

The one who really gains from elections is the poor peasant... this neglected, forgotten, and despised being is only valued on voting day. At any other time, his voice is lost in the wind, but on this particular day its

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> *Sabah al-Kheir*, November 9, 2000.

price is a function of demand. On this occasion, there are people who determine and pay its price.<sup>18</sup>

What is important to note here is the fact that the rush for supporters was to the benefit of the voters: the money handed out due to outbidding and competition between candidates would not necessarily determine for whom the people would vote. And this was especially the case in the 2000 elections, thanks to judicial supervision that allowed votes to be cast in secrecy.

To give a full picture, the other expenses involved in an election campaign must also be mentioned, if only in passing: the costs of holding political meetings (ex: renting of venue, equipment, etc.), purchase of campaign banners, printing leaflets and/or stickers, renting cars for promotional purposes, etc. Some candidates quickly fell into ostentatious exaggeration, sometimes to the point of appearing as grotesque or ridiculous. In Port Said, for example, a candidate, a well-off businessman,<sup>19</sup> thought it necessary to order 5,384 banners and 8,220 pictures bearing his face in order to outdo his rival who himself had requested 7,122 banners and 8,220 photos, on 2,500 of which he is featured standing next to Sheikh al-Sha'rawi. A determined man, this same candidate had planned to use a hot-air balloon that would have landed him right in the middle of the stadium's playing field, thus making the soccer game that was scheduled to take place there into a sort of political happening. But following the advice of some of his supporters, he finally opted for a safer tactic, that of making his entry through the stadium gates as the empty balloon bearing his name flew over the sports venue. More modern, a candidate from Suez used a helicopter to hand out pamphlets, pictures, and other types of promotional means.<sup>20</sup> Stories abound on this material outbidding and the excesses made during the election campaign.

Of course money was not the only source of discrimination among candidates. Many other factors created an imbalance between the different campaign strategies. Among these are the privileges and supports in terms

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<sup>18</sup> As quoted in *al-Ahram*, November 8, 2000.

<sup>19</sup> The socioeconomic status here largely explains the style and type of campaign of the individual in question.

<sup>20</sup> *Sabah al-Kheir*, November 9, 2000.

of means, electoral arguments, but mostly of official authorizations available through NDP membership or holding a ministerial post. Leaving aside any consideration of the effectiveness of the poll or the total transparency of the voting process, defeating a Minister of the Economy who is able to find work for 500 youths of his district (Shubra) within a month and a half period remains a difficult task. It is also through such means that an election battle is fought, and it is just such tangible benefits that strengthen the power of the NDP as party of government.

Let us now go back to and make a number of final comments on the electoral economy, the demands of which fed an also exponentially growing supply-side. The 'campaign trades' were indeed various and profitable. The fabric merchants were the first to benefit from the cutthroat competition prevailing among the candidates. Some of these traders witnessed a rise of more than 30 per cent in sales. Then came the calligraphers hired to write the banners, the price of which ranges between LE130 and LE300 a piece according to the technique involved and the poster printers. Furthermore, political meetings require equipment which is provided in part by individuals renting large tents, some of whom have stated being able to live for two or three years off the profits made during this period. A must in any event of such type, the hosts-warm-up men charge no less than LE300 for a two-hour performance.<sup>21</sup> Without taking into account all the gifts and donations made by the candidates, one did not need to resort to number crunching to realize the extent to which the Ministry of the Interior's guideline capping campaign spending at LE10,000 per candidate was far disconnected from reality.

For the political newcomers, the campaign bill turned out to be quite burdensome. The skyrocketing of campaign costs has certainly favored a certain category of candidates, namely the businessmen, who have made a massive entry in the People's Assembly. The vote results speak for themselves: 77 of the new MPs are businessmen, who together make up 17 per cent of total seats.<sup>22</sup> But in order to avoid partiality and oversimplification, one should not link their electoral victory to this single

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<sup>21</sup> The data is taken from a report published in *Al-Ahram Hebdo*, September 27-October 3, 2000.

<sup>22</sup> Which is approximately twice their proportion in the previous People's Assembly (1995 elections).

dimension. Indeed, one must also take into account the high status that economic success currently enjoys in the political realm. The prodigality of businessmen during the campaign was seen as proof in a way of their success as entrepreneurs and of their managerial skills. Whether through electoral arguments or in discourses in general, there is a demand for having more say in public policy-making based on claims of economic competence and command of managerial techniques. While this high regard for economic success is not shared by all, indeed is sometimes shaken by accusations of corruption and racketeering, its underlying assumption remains unshaken: who better than managers and prosperous businessmen can push forward development and pull the country out of the economic crisis? The future will judge of the significance and posterity of this trend, which no doubt deserves further examination and discussion.

And so, to return to the elections per se, and following upon the previous comments, one thing is rather clear: for material or financial reasons, many candidates were left out of the race. The ever rising cost of election campaigns has made it so that despite judicial supervision the distribution of elected candidates according to socioeconomic class or status has been left rather unchanged.

But let us not be mistaken: this is in no way new or specific to these elections. Their novel aspect lies rather in the fact that the higher number of candidates has made the phenomenon more obvious. In the end, we can say that one of the main features of these elections is that they made it possible for more people to learn about political participation.

To sum up, the 2000 elections signaled two trends that may make up part of the future political landscape in Egypt: the individualization of the act of voting and the wrapping of electoral stakes in personal and concrete terms: But one should not jump to conclusions or indulge in futurology since no clear or definite assessment can yet be made of these elections, not to mention the fact that until today elections in Egypt may be seen more as a national ritual than as a genuine opportunity for deep and significant political change. Indeed for most voters and candidates they are a time for redistribution in the most material sense of the word, a period where politics gains a tangible sense.



Through this study, I have tried to show that different readings of the elections can be made. In this sense, the 2000 elections were neither more exceptional nor more noteworthy than the previous ones. However, they were not totally similar to past elections either: despite their expected outcome, they did allow some people to vote in a more autonomous way and led to sometimes amazing situations. Apart from the victory of 17 Muslim Brotherhood candidates, the most notable and significant surprises came from NDP members. Indeed, while the fact that most independent runners joined the ranks of the NDP following their electoral victory was a clear gain for the ruling party and allowed it to secure its absolute majority in the new Parliament, it is nevertheless also clear that President Mubarak's party was dealt serious blows through some qualitatively significant defeats.<sup>23</sup> The bitter defeat of such heavyweights as heads of parliamentary committees, former governors, NDP secretary-generals in a number of governorates, or still of former ministers, came as a hard hit to the overconfidence and certainties of some individuals. As early as the first election round, the party's dismal performance prompted lively debates and came under harsh internal criticism. Its poor faring at the polls served as an opportunity for the supporters of a major party restructuring to make their voices heard and to heap opprobrium on part of the old guard. Since that time, the syndicate elections of March 2001 only strengthened the reformers' arguments. The balance of power within the ruling party is undoubtedly changing. But for now, one can only speculate on the ultimate consequences of the outcome of the 2000 parliamentary elections. In the end, one fact stands out clearly: the election results reflected a will for change rather than a genuine gain for the advocates of democracy.

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<sup>23</sup> As a reminder, let us note that the NDP won 57 seats and lost 91 in the first round, it won 42 and lost 92 following the second round, and finally it was able to keep 72 seats and lost 92 in the third round.