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Can Egypt's Troubled Elections Produce a More Democratic Future?

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As a result of Egypt's just-completed parliamentary elections, the Egyptian political system has emerged as sharply bipolar. On the one hand stands a semiauthoritarian regime, centered on the institution of the presidency. The regime shows some cracks and divisions as well as initial signs of a succession crisis, but it still has an overwhelming ability to dominate and structure public life. On the other hand stands an Islamist movement led by the Muslim Brotherhood. Founded seventy-seven years ago, it is the most successful and sustained nonofficial political actor in modern Arab history. But it has always had tense relationships with political authorities who see it as a challenge and with other political forces who doubt its intentions.

Other political actors—most notably a host of political parties and movements that form the secular opposition—performed quite poorly in the elections. At least for the next few years, Egyptian politics will be dominated by the relationship between the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood's rise can support Egyptian democratization, but only if the regime and the Brotherhood leadership avoid full confrontation.

Rules of the Electoral Game in Egypt

Although Egypt has a long history of parliamentary life stretching back to the nineteenth century, the rules for parliamentary elections have always been contested and are often shaped to guarantee a particular outcome. Since the regime launched a limited liberalization program in the 1970s, it has carefully crafted electoral rules to allow for real opposition representation in parliament but in insufficient numbers to embarrass the government or significantly affect policy. It has also manipulated the sort of opposition allowed, working at times to exclude more strident voices.

The regime has deployed a wide variety of tools before elections to serve these ends—closely controlling licensing of political parties, monitoring nongovernmental organizations, harassing previously legalized groups and parties, and carefully devising electoral rules to entice opposition elements to participate while depriving them of the possibility of winning

more than a smattering of parliamentary seats. On election day itself, the regime left oversight of balloting to the trustworthy Ministry of Interior.

Regime's Shifting Set of Tools

Over the past twenty years, however, a series of court decisions has forced the regime to constantly shift its methods. Parties denied a license have sometimes successfully appealed to administrative courts to win legal recognition. Egypt's Supreme Constitutional Court has ruled that political independents have a right to compete for office, thus invalidating electoral systems based on party lists. This ruling has undermined the ability of the regime to keep some parties out of electoral competition; it has also weakened the control of the regime's National Democratic Party (NDP) over its own members; those denied party nomination have regularly sought election as independents and then successfully gained readmission to a party anxious to retain its parliamentary majority.

The effect of such judicial decisions, however, should not be overstated. The Muslim Brotherhood itself never sought to form a party, held back by its own ambivalence about converting into a purely political movement as well as strong suspicion that it would never be allowed to register. And this suspicion seems justified—in 1995, a group of Brotherhood activists left the movement to form their own party dedicated to melding liberal and Islamic values. The resulting Wasat (Center) Party is still waiting for its status to be resolved. Convinced that the rules were stacked against them, most opposition parties lost interest in parliamentary elections, with boycotts becoming common over the past decade.

For the 2000 parliamentary elections, the regime was hit with a particularly inconvenient judicial ruling: The Supreme Constitutional Court held that the constitution mandated full judicial supervision over the balloting itself. This ruling necessitated voting to be spread out over a period of weeks (because of the limited number of judges). It also forced the regime to move some of its most heavy-handed techniques outside of the polling place. For example, opposition activists were arrested or found their telephones disconnected; voters in precincts known to be opposition strongholds encountered physical obstructions; and security forces stood careful guard around polling places, barring or harassing candidate supporters and poll watchers. The result was favorable to the government although only after a large number of “independents” were allowed back into the NDP. However, the methods were so extreme that the elections did little to enhance the regime's democratic credentials.

2005 Parliamentary Elections

Under heavy domestic and international pressure to devise a more credible system, the 2005 elections were nominally entrusted to a newly formed electoral commission. This step far from reassured opposition elements, but a variety of other factors convinced those who had sat on the sidelines to enter the electoral fray with enthusiasm.

First, U.S. pressure for political reform, while viewed skeptically by participants across the political spectrum, combined with greater international attention and emerging international standards for conducting elections to ensure that official actions would be watched far more closely than in the past. Second, the regime seemed confused with signs of a succession crisis already clearly evident. Third, freedom to expression had undoubtedly expanded since the last elections. The regime still showed far less tolerance for free association than it did for free expression, but livelier public discussions led to the perception that political “red lines”—always vague and contested—had become murky and subject to modification.

Fourth, some new political actors, most notably the Kifaya movement, sprang forward. The contribution of Kifaya had less to do with its popular support and more to do with its willingness to push free expression to its limits and challenge prevailing cynicism that working for political change is futile (indeed, the recent elections, in which it participated in a united front with other opposition movements, showed that Kifaya has simply failed to date in mobilizing large numbers of supporters). Finally, the enhanced role for the judiciary in overseeing elections set off a bitter struggle among judges. This assured opposition parties that even if blatant electoral manipulation still occurred, it might also be challenged in some instances.

All of these developments combined to create a sense of opportunity among Egypt's diverse opposition groups as well as a perception that the regime that had so carefully manipulated the electoral game in the past was momentarily off balance. None of Egypt's political actors expected that parliamentary elections would result in anything other than a victory for the NDP. But the extent of that victory, the nature and size of the parliamentary opposition, and the ability of the regime to prevent meaningful reform were all open to question.

The sense that change was possible created strong incentives for opposition groups to hammer out joint programs and electoral lists so that they could confront the regime with a united front. Since the rebirth of a multiparty system in Egypt in the 1970s, opposition parties had periodically discussed a united front but attempts generally collapsed because of deep ideological and personal divisions. This time the net was cast wider than in the past. Not only were legal opposition parties included but also the Kifaya movement and respected nonpartisan public figures.

The formation of the National Front for Change and Reform united most major opposition movements around a detailed program of political reform and an agreement to coordinate so that candidates from various components of the Front would not compete against each other in parliamentary elections. Personal rivalries were not completely forgotten, however. For instance, it became impossible to include Ayman Nour's Tomorrow Party in the Front because of animosities remaining from his leaving the Wafd Party. Moreover, there was a far more conspicuous absence as well: the Muslim Brotherhood stayed out of the Front.

Part of the Brotherhood's absence can be explained by the attitude of other opposition parties. One opposition leader—from the leftist 'Tajammu' Party—made very clear his deep distrust of the Brotherhood. Some liberals and leftists preferred an authoritarian regime to Islamist rule. Still others suspected not that the Brotherhood was too extreme but that the authorities would find it quite pliant, willing to negotiate a separate bargain with the regime to the exclusion of the rest of the opposition. And all opposition leaders viewed the Brotherhood quite warily because of its much more extensive organizational structure and experience.

The Brotherhood viewed other opposition parties with equal distrust. By their actions, Brotherhood leaders made clear their estimation that potential alliance partners had little to offer since the opposition parties had no national organization or proven record that could match the Brotherhood. In addition, the failure of many opposition movements to denounce authoritarian measures taken against the Brotherhood deepened the mistrust.

2005 Results

The NDP won its expected victory, obtaining a total of 311 seats (including candidates nominated by the party and candidates who joined the party—or rejoined it—immediately

after their victory). With the parliament composed of 444 elected deputies and ten appointed by the president, this will allow the NDP to enjoy a comfortable majority in all significant matters.

But just as remarkable was the extent to which it had to resort to clumsy tools to guarantee such a result. Independents who had defeated NDP candidates were rushed into the party. In districts where opposition candidates were strong, police were used to surround polling stations to prevent voters from reaching the polls. Journalists covering voting were physically attacked. Supervising judges who publicly criticized official behavior were threatened with prosecution, while the perpetrators of violence were allowed to act unimpeded. The result was something of a schizophrenic election: The campaign itself saw freer discussion and media coverage, limited but real willingness to accept some domestic monitoring, discrete arrangements for international observers, and the creation of at least the form of an independent election commission. But as the extent of the Brotherhood's strength became clear, the gloves came off. By that time, only the crudest of tools were left to produce the regime's desired outcome. Far more thuggery and manipulation were necessary than was healthy to protect the regime's reputation.

The performance of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Egyptian parliamentary elections of November-December 2005 came as a surprise to the ruling NDP as well as to secular opposition forces. The Brotherhood obtained a total of 88 parliamentary seats, by far the strongest showing by an Egyptian opposition party in half a century. And even more striking was the rate of success. Sixty-one percent of the 144 candidates it nominated won. This represents a six-fold increase over their 2000 showing of seventeen seats.

Other opposition groups performed very badly. Indeed, the Brotherhood's calculations regarding the opposition coalition weakness proved extremely accurate. The National Front for Change and Reform was unable to mount effective campaigns in most districts and won only twelve seats. In the end, the Brotherhood won a large number of races on its own.

Why did the Brotherhood do so well?

Explaining the Success of the Brotherhood

The Brotherhood's success can be explained by three factors. First, it is a tribute to the movement's organizational and political acumen. Most of those Egyptians who cast their votes for the Brotherhood, despite the harsh measures taken by the security forces to disrupt the voting, did so out of conviction that the movement represented a viable political alternative for the country. To be sure, the movement's slogan "Islam is the solution" and its religious discourse attracted those voters who believe in the need for Egyptian society to return to what they see as a truer Islam and to re-Islamize public life.

But the attractiveness of the Brotherhood goes beyond ideology. It lies even more in the movement's intensive presence in a variety of social spheres and its ability to base itself on a variety of grass-roots service-provision organizations. The Brotherhood is connected with a broad social movement, parts of which work in the fields of health care, education, and poverty alleviation. The gradual and uneven withdrawal of Egyptian state institutions from such social and economic fields since the mid-1970s left a significant vacuum that religious forces filled with their financial resources, organizational capacities, and experience in charitable activities. In the process new social networks based on trust among citizens have been created.

The Brotherhood's extended rural and urban networks are not primarily politically driven, but the organization has been able to use them since the 1980s to create political capital that it can draw on to mobilize a sizable number of Egyptians in a variety of ways—such as demonstrations, professional association elections, and parliamentary elections. In each of the three stages of the 2005 parliamentary elections, the Brotherhood was able to mobilize its members and supporters at polling places. While in one sense, it was precisely such mobilization that prompted the violence of the security forces and government manipulation of the results, it simultaneously counterbalanced the official measures and allowed the Brotherhood to register its surprising electoral gains.

The second factor explaining the Brotherhood's success involves Egypt's other parties. The NDP provoked protest votes, but the remarkable weakness of the country's registered opposition parties drove such votes in the Brotherhood's direction. The older opposition parties, mainly the liberal Wafd and the leftist and staunchly secular 'Tajammu' as well as the new ones such as the Tomorrow Party both lack an effective presence in Egyptian society.

In the wake of its poor electoral performance in the 2000 parliamentary elections the NDP articulated a new reformist discourse and worked to develop its internal structures, but these steps had no noticeable effects on its performance. Indeed, the rate of the success of the NDP's candidates remained at roughly 40 percent; it obtained a parliamentary majority only by embracing "NDP independents" who won election despite the party's refusal to nominate them. More distressing for the NDP leadership was the performance of its candidates when they ran head-to-head against Brotherhood candidates: Almost 70 percent of NDP nominees lost such contests. In other words, those voters given a direct and unambiguous choice between the NDP and the Brotherhood chose the Brotherhood by a wide margin. The NDP—with a corrupt old guard and a bewildered young guard—simply cannot find widespread public acceptance. Were it not able to exploit the state apparatus to enhance its electoral performance then it would have lost its hegemonic position in the Egyptian political system.

There is no escape from the fact that the secular opposition parties have failed to build a popular base. Even those that earlier showed some organizational capacity such as the Wafd have atrophied. Their electoral platforms, campaigns, and strategies were poorly developed and showed few signs of serious planning. Beyond blaming their failure on the limited political pluralism of the last two decades or the regime's containment strategies, fault must also be found within the inner workings of the secular opposition parties themselves. Unless these parties are willing to undertake an honest self-assessment and devote far more attention to internal development, they are destined to disappear.

The third factor explaining the Brotherhood's strong performance is the unprecedented local and international attention that focused on the elections and the way that they were administered. The effect was to restrict the NDP's freedom of maneuver in its customary manipulation of results. Greater involvement by judicial actors, local monitoring organizations, and independent media did not result in a complete disappearance of electoral violations, but it did lead to marginally more credible results. Still, the NDP managed to succeed (to the extent that it did) with the assistance of the security forces, especially in the second and third stages. By publicly preventing—by terror and by force—the participation of voters in contested districts, the NDP managed to prevent the Muslim Brotherhood from challenging its two-thirds majority.

In the end the Brotherhood emerged as the only credible opposition to the regime. Those who voted for Brotherhood candidates were not casting mere protest votes, however. There

was, after all, a collection of candidates from the Front and the Tomorrow Party that were far less successful. Instead, the Brotherhood's strong showing can be ascribed to its willingness to spend years creating a nationwide social and political network and its ability to cultivate an image of personal rectitude and dedicated public service.

How does the Brotherhood intend to use its electoral success?

What Does the Brotherhood Want?

One of the major outcomes of the elections is that the Brotherhood has established itself as the largest opposition force in the country. At least for the time being, the Egyptian political system has become bipolar. For the next few years, the shape of politics and the fate of political reform will be determined in no small part by how the Brotherhood uses its position as well as by the relationship that develops between the movement and the regime.

The 2005 electoral platform of the Brotherhood clearly expressed the priority of political reform. Indeed, this has been a marked tendency in the Brotherhood's rhetoric for the past two years. The movement has expressed a vision of reform that does not differ from those advanced by secular opposition groups and parties. All call for immediate adoption of a series of policies and measures, including repealing the emergency law, lifting limitations placed on formation of parties and civic associations, ending restrictions on political freedoms, providing guarantees for the independence of the judiciary, and activating the parliament's oversight role. These steps are aimed at producing a qualitative transformation in the relationship between state and citizen. Moreover, the Brotherhood's vision mirrors that of other opposition groups in framing the steps of political reform in terms of a comprehensive set of constitutional amendments to provide for rotations in power in a democratic manner. The Brotherhood also demands the protection of public freedoms, including those of belief, opinion, and expression. But the commonality between the political reform elements stressed by the Brotherhood and the secular opposition should not obscure some essential differences between their platforms.

Even though the Brotherhood has made a strategic decision to stress political reform, it still has a social and cultural agenda that can come into conflict with its liberal political priorities. The Muslim Brotherhood's election platform is characterized by some notable internal tensions, some of which come in the context of its stress on its Islamic *marja'yya* (source or reference point). The platform states that "the *marja'yya* upon which we base our program for change is an Islamic one with democratic means in a modern civil state." Elsewhere the movement calls for "a civil state founded to implement the *sharia* and govern within the boundaries established by the Islamic religion." The platform does not expand on its conception of an Islamic *marja'yya* when it treats the issue of political reform, nor does it do so when it discusses the traditional issues stressed by the Brotherhood in the 1980s and 1990s, such as the application of the Islamic *sharia* and the Islamization of public life. By its use of very broad but seemingly pragmatic terms, the Brotherhood's rhetoric provokes some genuine doubts. The question about how much its principle of an Islamic *marja'yya* remains in tension with its acknowledgement of the civic nature of the state is crucial and cannot be left to unspecified statements.

The potential for contradiction is strongest in the conception of citizenship, the rights of non-Muslims, and the scope of religious restrictions on public freedoms. For instance, there are small but significant differences in the various statements made by movement leaders regarding Egypt's Christian Coptic minority. The deputy head of the movement,

Muhammad Habib, recently stressed that Copts should have all rights of citizenship except for assuming the position of head of state, whereas ‘Abd al-Min‘am Abu al-Futuh, another prominent leader, claimed that the movement has no objection to a Copt as president. Other statements from various candidates in the elections, however, which call on intellectuals and opinion makers to respect the “Islamic feelings” of Egyptians, deepen the doubts regarding the compatibility between the Brotherhood’s liberal politics and its less liberal cultural and social preferences.

One way to understand the Brotherhood’s likely course is to analyze its political behavior in recent years. The Brotherhood is frequently accused of insincerity in its commitment to democracy, nonviolence, pluralism, and rotation of power. But the record of the Brotherhood in the 1980s and 1990s in professional associations, faculty clubs, and student unions suggests otherwise. In those structures, members of the Brotherhood honored the results of the balloting whether they were favorable or not, as long as the electoral process was reasonably clean.

Nationally, in the recent parliament, the movement’s small bloc, which began with seventeen seats in 2000 and declined to fifteen when the government successfully overturned the election of two deputies, did put forward a series of parliamentary questions and interpellations of ministers that focused on the compatibility of some laws with the Islamic *sharia* as well as a set of moral and cultural issues. But the Brotherhood deputies also expressed concern about economic and social issues, especially corruption and unemployment. In the final two years, they joined the trend to give priority to political reform and to confront the NDP’s legislative agenda in the field of political rights, political parties, and amendment of Article 76 of the constitution (governing presidential elections) when the ruling party’s initiative lacked a democratic basis.

For the recent parliamentary elections, the movement was actually willing to join a united opposition front that included the Kifaya movement and the Wafd, Arab Nasserist, Tajammu’, Wasat, and Dignity parties. In the end, as mentioned above, it made a tactical decision in the end not to join in the composition of a joint slate. But by displaying respect for its pluralism even as it contained secular forces, the Brotherhood managed to situate itself in the heart of the movement for political reform. Indeed, it defended the rights of its secularist reform allies.

In the campaign, the Brotherhood was accused of conspiring against non-Islamist candidates in the parliamentary elections, but this charge amounts to an attempt by secular opposition forces to rationalize their failures and avoid confronting the extent to which they have atrophied. Although it is true that the Brotherhood candidates did seek to assure their own victory, even if it meant defeating other members of the opposition, any criticism of its behavior on this score seems to be based on confusion between politics and philanthropy. The Brotherhood did not renounce its gains, but this can hardly serve as a realistic standard of its commitment to democratic principles.

The overall picture that emerges is of a movement that can be a force for serious political reform if efforts are made to incorporate it into the political system, but also one that still provokes questions about its social and religious agenda. The impact of the Brotherhood on the Egyptian political system depends in large part on how the regime decides to respond to the movement’s electoral performance. In addition, choices made by the Brotherhood itself and by external actors can deeply affect the political outcome.

Possible Government Responses

The Mubarak regime faces three choices in dealing with the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood. First, it can try to suppress the movement. Should it choose this path, it would not necessarily emulate the extreme measures taken by the Algerian regime in the first half of the 1990s. In the Algerian case, the Islamic Salvation Front stood on the brink of a parliamentary majority, while Egypt's Brotherhood will only form a minority. But it would be possible for the regime to resort to escalating repressive measures rather than a sudden crackdown. A series of steps to harass the Brotherhood—such as those taken by the Egyptian regime throughout much of the 1990s—could be followed by dissolution of the parliament as a less dramatic—and perhaps less costly—path to repression. Selective arrests, harassment of activists, exclusion from official institutions, and closure of Islamist institutions could all be used to inhibit the Brotherhood's operational capacities. If executed skillfully this strategy might avoid international criticism and pressure, especially if the regime exploits the specter of an Islamic takeover. With the sharp polarization in Egyptian politics, such a path might attract the support of Copts and secularists who fear the Brotherhood more than they resent the regime. But the strategy would have real costs as well—not only in terms of repression but also in the likely return to political stalemate that characterized the 1990s.

The second possible scenario for the regime is to accept the new role of the Brotherhood in the political space and accommodate it similar to the Jordanian experience of the last decade in which Islamists were invited into the government and assigned ministerial posts. This scenario might have two beneficial effects for the regime: It could lead to a partial cooptation of the Brotherhood, and it might also force the Brotherhood to deliver practical improvements rather than serve only as an external critic of government performance. However, this path is far less likely in Egypt than it was in Jordan because of far greater regime mistrust of the Brotherhood. Indeed, portions of the ruling elite fear that the Brotherhood aims for total domination of politics, not merely sharing power.

The third scenario open to the regime is cautious accommodation of the Brotherhood by means of accepting the composition of the People's Assembly as it emerges out of the elections and searching for common ground with the Brotherhood, perhaps by accepting a measure of political reform in return for Brotherhood cooperation on issues related to presidential succession. After all, some of Mubarak's advisors and a few within the NDP see the moderation and pragmatism of the movement, especially their restrained tone in addressing leading officials, as attributes that might be encouraged if the movement becomes accommodated as a loyal opposition group with a significant but contained parliamentary role. This scenario offers the most promising possibilities for transcending the current polarization of the Egyptian political system by means of introducing genuine political reform.

Muslim Brotherhood's Choices

The Brotherhood also has different options in this new political landscape. Should it choose to continue in its flexible and pragmatic approach, avoiding direct threats to the regime or deepening fears among the opposition or segments of the broader population, especially the Coptic and business communities, it would help foster a political environment capable of integrating it as a legitimate political actor. This option would require a continued use of moderate rhetoric toward the regime and a strategy of self-restraint such as the Brotherhood displayed when it ran candidates for only one-quarter of the seats in the parliament. Nor can

the Brotherhood abandon its partial alliances with other opposition forces in support of political reform.

This option, if reciprocated by a regime engaging in cautious accommodation, might entail the eventual legalization of a political party for the Brotherhood in the context of rather broad understandings between the regime and the movement.

However, given the new weight of the Brotherhood as the dominant bloc within the opposition camp and the conviction of some of its leaders that they have successfully challenged the regime in the parliamentary elections, the movement might be tempted to press for immediate political gains, primarily legalization as a political party. If the Brotherhood pursues this path in a confrontational way—mobilizing its supporters and attempting to intimidate rather than negotiate with the regime—it would likely increase the current polarization of the political scene. One of the major implications of this scenario would be that other opposition actors, although extremely weakened, would move away from the Brotherhood and possibly to join regime voices in calling on the state authority to eliminate or control the movement, which in turn would make it easier for the regime to engage in a gentler version of the Algerian path.

Conclusion: A Constructive Outside Role?

External actors cannot determine the shape of relations between the Brotherhood and the regime, but they can enter into the calculations of actors who are deliberating on the most appropriate path to follow. This is especially the case with the United States, which has a very close relationship with the Egyptian government. Indeed, the Muslim Brotherhood leadership has made clear that they regard the current political opening in Egypt as partially produced by U.S. pressure, even as they question the motives behind the shift in U.S. policy.

The United States can encourage the possibility of the cautious accommodation by continuing to stress the importance of the construction of a democratic process and by avoiding being drawn into discussions on limiting the actors who can win in such a process. The United States has legitimate fears regarding the rise of some Islamist movements in the region and some deep policy differences with the Brotherhood. But if it allows the regime to exploit those fears to cast the Muslim Brotherhood as a security threat rather than a legitimate political actor, it will be encouraging the adoption of a modified Algerian scenario.

Democratic transition will not occur by waiting for liberal democratic forces that precisely fit U.S. policy positions. Democracy is far more likely to emerge in Egypt and other parts of the Arab world from the daily tussles of a political process in which the current rulers and their opponents come to realize that they cannot vanquish each other. The strong showing of the Muslim Brotherhood in the parliamentary elections can thus contribute to democratization if it leads the Egyptian government to find ways to accommodate the movement's popularity and demands for political reform. The United States should encourage all efforts to this end. ■

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