

Special Edition



Editor: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

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De-Democratizing Egyptian Elections

Mira Tzoreff

Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Egypt is a signatory, stipulates that "every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity...to vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections...that shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors." Moreover, on August 17th, 2005, President Husni Mubarak promised to "enshrine the liberties of the citizen and reinvigorate political parties." Indeed, Egypt has a democratic apparatus: an elected parliament, a consultative council, political parties, opposition movements and even NGO's. However, the outcomes of the June 2010 Consultative Council elections and the recent People's Assembly elections proved that the regime will not accept a truly democratic electoral process as long as President Mubarak senses that opposition political forces are committed to challenging his continued rule.

Egypt's Emergency Law, which has been in place continuously since President Anwar Sadat's assassination in 1981, has been used in recent weeks to disperse demonstrations and public meetings—especially those of the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's most powerful opposition group—as well as to detain people without charge. On November 21st security forces arrested 1,206 Brotherhood members (five of whom were parliamentary candidates) demonstrating in Alexandria. They were charged with membership in an illegal organization, distributing publications that threaten

public order, and constituting a religious party, due to their promotion of the slogan, "Islam is the Solution." Running as independents, Brotherhood members had won 88 parliamentary seats in 2005, and the Egyptian authorities were clearly determined to cut the organization down to size. Hence, it hardly came as a surprise when the 130 Brotherhood candidates failed to win even a single seat. Commenting on the outcome, Esam El-Erian, one of the prominent leaders of the Brotherhood, told *Al-Ahram Weekly* that the election results constituted a well planned act of exclusion and that the movement anticipated a ferocious political war with the authorities.

As part of its heavy-handed strategy to defeat opposition candidates, the government imposed severe restrictions on the media during the run-up to the election. Ibrahim Issa, editor of *Al-Dustur*, a daily newspaper openly critical of the regime, was fired on October 5th after writing that "the Egyptian regime cannot give up cheating in elections." On October 10 the National Telecommunications Regulatory Authority announced that companies sending text messages to subscribers were required to secure prior permission from the Ministry of Information. This new regulation targeted the Muslim Brotherhood and the April 6 movement, both of which employ text messaging to mobilize activists for demonstrations. On October 13 the government brought private companies' live television broadcasts under state control. The result of these measures was the disruption of satellite channels, talk shows and cyberspace. The journalists' syndicate condemned the government's restrictions as "an organized attack on media freedom."

Egyptian authorities also rejected the offers of domestic and international judicial supervisors, civil society and human rights organizations, to monitor the elections. Instead, the High Elections Commission, a government-sponsored body, supervised the elections, making electoral transparency virtually impossible. Security forces demonstrated hyperactivity in limiting opposition campaigns, including widespread arrests of supporters and even candidates. Election Day itself was marred by violence in some areas, resulting in four deaths.

Sixty-four women were elected to parliament, as required by a 2009 law. According to the Egyptian Center of Women's Rights, the new quota encouraged more women from various political parties to run in the elections, 1046 overall, as compared to 127 in 2005 and 121 in 2000. While the new law constituted a significant expansion of opportunities for women to enter politics, it also was a useful tool for President

Mubarak to demonstrate his liberalizing intentions to domestic and international human rights group, and even more importantly, to Western governments.

The ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) and affiliated independents won 93% of the seats in the People's Assembly. While the Muslim Brotherhood candidates were shut out of parliament entirely, other opposition parties hardly fared better; for example, in the first round of voting, the leftist *Tagammu`* won only one seat; the two liberal parties, the *Wafd* and *al-Ghad*, won two seats and one seat, respectively; and the largely unknown Social Justice Party won one seat.

According to the Egyptian analyst Ammar Ali Hassan, the NDP will now have to contend with three concurrent crises. First, the ruling party has created a crisis of credibility by neglecting to fulfill its promise to the Egyptian people of providing electoral transparency and equal opportunity for all candidates. Indeed, all opposition parties came out of the elections feeling deceived. The second crisis is a structural one that reached its climax during the present elections. Electoral politics in the Mubarak era have been conducted according to a "restricted party plurality" system that relies on a strong ruling party surrounded by small opposition groups, creating no more than a façade of democracy. The 2010 elections undermined even this façade, thus making it extremely difficult to market itself abroad as a moderate regime committed to the promotion of increased political liberalization. The third crisis is the crisis of legitimacy that the regime suffers from as a result of the *Via Dolorosa* which both the opposition parties and the voters passed through during the elections. Restoring a measure of that legitimacy in the public's eyes through the revitalization of the political system will be no small task.

The opposition parties are partly to blame for the outcome of the elections: they failed to remain united when they needed to, and failed to boycott the elections when doing so would have been a relatively effective option. Instead, they participated in elections that were almost guaranteed not to be fair—essentially running for the sake of running. Since what they called 'the farce of elections,' both the *Wafd* and the Muslim Brothers did belatedly adopt the boycott option, withdrawing from the second round of the elections that were held on December 5. Moreover, for the first time ever, opposition groups have taken an initiative to establish a popular (*sha'abi*) shadow parliament, aiming at challenging the legality of the newly elected People's Assembly. Mohamed ElBaradei, an Egyptian opposition activist and potential presidential candidate, went even further, urging his supporters to boycott next year's presidential elections. "The regime must understand that it is our right to march in

peaceful demonstrations to demand change," he declared, "If we are prevented we will resort to peaceful civil disobedience... if we are not allowed...there will be violence....The elections might be the straw that breaks the camel's back."

The existence of an effective opposition is an essential component of a functioning, and ultimately legitimate democratic political system. Egypt's autocratic rule, which barely maintains a semblance of parliamentary life, and in which the opposition is no more than a décor, clearly does not belong in that category. Egypt's ruling elite, headed by Mubarak, clearly prefers the status quo to the risks entailed in opening up Egypt's political system, even at the risk of losing any semblance of democratic legitimacy. Still, the presence of opposition parties and movements in the streets of Cairo proves that there are social and political forces within Egypt which are not reconciled to the regime's de-democratization measures.

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