

Egypt: The Year of the Elections and Elusive Political Reforms

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The year 2005 was a momentous, yet turbulent one for Egypt. The country witnessed two major elections, presidential and parliamentary, a vibrant movement towards political reform, and a remarkable political mobility. All this came against a background of internal domestic pressures on the regime to expand the scope of pluralism, and amidst concerns that President Mubarak would run for office for a fifth term, thus ruling Egypt for 29 years. The increased interest of external actors, particularly the US and the EU, in political reforms has also prompted the regime to introduce a series of measures that allowed the country, for the first time since it became a republic, to have a multi-candidate presidential elections and a relatively more contested legislative elections.

It is uncertain, however, whether these measures will allow Egypt to embark on the threshold of a genuine democratization. As it seems, Egypt presents a classical case of an authoritarian or a semi-authoritarian regime that suffers from a clear erosion of its legitimacy and popularity, low capacity to address the economic and social problems of large segments of society, a crisis of political succession, and an increasing opposition to a possible Syrian-style hand-over of power to Mubarak's son, Gamal. All these issues have emboldened various groups and segments in the society during 2004 and 2005 to articulate publicly their protest against a further extension for

Mubarak and the grooming of his son to possibly take over power after him. In a relatively short time, several protest movements emerged including *Kifaya* (Enough), the National Rally for Democratic Change, in addition to tens of pro-change groups. The country's main Islamic movement, the Muslim Brothers, joined the pro-reform movement and staged a number of massive demonstrations across the country, calling for a faster pace for the reforms and expanding public freedoms. The judges also joined the pro-reform movement and pressed the regime for certain demands that would ensure the independence of the judiciary in return for their supervision over the presidential and parliamentary elections, scheduled to take place in September and November, respectively. All these pro-reform forces seem to have reached an agreement on a clear list of demands that included ending the state of emergency (in effect since Mubarak assumed power in 1981); freedom of association; holding free and clean elections, changing the Constitution, limiting the powers of the president; granting more authority to the parliament; and enhancing the independence of the Judiciary. To circumvent the growing demands for reform, the regime engaged the licensed opposition parties in a closed dialogue, for which it has set and controlled the reform agenda. It dismissed any discussion of the possibility of amending the constitution, changing the rules of the presidential elections, or lifting the state of emergency. It allowed for minor changes in some of the existing restrictive laws that regulate the formation of political parties and the electoral system.

The Amendment of Article 76: Conditional Contestation

President Mubarak's announcement in February 2005 to allow for an amendment of Article 76, which dealt with the rules for the selection of the president, came as a surprise. After all, the licensed opposition parties had already accepted during their dialogue with the regime to drop this demand for the time being. Several factors could explain Mubarak's decision to change this article. The way the article was amended clearly served Mubarak to boost his legitimacy through low-risk competitive elections and would pave the way for his son to take over power in a seemingly more "democratic" way. The amendment allowed for more than one candidate to run for the presidency. However, it introduced elaborate conditions that make it almost impossible for a non-National Democratic Party member (NDP, the state party), particularly independents, to stand a chance of being eligible to become a candidate. To stand for election, the amended article allows only candidates of political parties that had won 5% of the seats in the Parliament to run. It requires independent candidates to secure 250 signatures of elected officials in the Parliament, the Shoura Council, and local councils. Despite the reservations of the opposition parties, the amendment was approved by almost 83% in a popular referendum on May 25th, a day that was marred by state brutality against protesters who opposed the way the amendment was legally drafted. State-backed thugs sexually molested and beat several female protesters. The violence triggered a wide domestic

anger, as well as criticism from the outside world.

The Presidential Elections: New Form... Same Results

Ten candidates contested the presidential elections that took place on September 7th. This was preceded with public election campaigns, in which the state media maintained some degree of neutrality. For the first time, Egyptians were exposed to different views attempting to address their domestic problems. Mubarak, who was projected in a new look, made expansive campaign promises focusing on the creation of new jobs, providing housing and introducing further political reforms. It is clear from the results of the elections that what changed was the form, but not the substance of this particular aspect of Egyptian politics. Despite the fact that this was the first competitive elections in post 1952 Revolution Egypt, voters turn-out was strikingly low, reaching only 23%. The majority of voters (77%) demonstrated a high level of apathy, perhaps sending a message of no confidence in the whole process. Mubarak still won more than 88.5% (6.3 million) of the valid votes (7.3 million); Ayman Nour, the leader of the newly formed Ghad (Tomorrow) Party, came second with 8% (540,000); Noman Gouma, the head of the historic Wafd Party, came third with less than 3% (200,000). A careful reading of the results shows that Mubarak won only 19.6% of the 32 million registered voters; and less than 12% of the eligible voters (48 million). Ayman Nour emerged as the major challenger to the president, and a possible future threat. The results also reflected the profound structural weaknesses of the opposition parties in the country. Typically, the political parties were divided and failed to back a single opposition candidate to run against the incumbent president. Some opposition parties, like the leftist Tagamu and the Nasserites, boycotted the elections; while the Muslim Brotherhood allowed its members to vote, but did not favour a particular candidate. Seven party leaders who ran against the president received a total of only 2% of the votes,

reflecting the lack of popularity of the political parties. Though his victory came as no surprise, the results of the presidential elections could hardly enable Mubarak to claim a new legitimacy.

The Parliamentary Elections: The Limits for the Reforms

The Parliamentary elections of 2005 clearly showed the limits to political reforms, as they were marred by state violence, intimidation of voters, and rigging. The elections were held over three phases to ensure complete judicial supervision. Mubarak promised a clean and transparent election. Nonetheless, the second and third phases were characterized by severe irregularities, vote-stuffing, thuggery, and state violence that resulted in seven deaths and tens of casualties. The state party, NDP, won 314 out of 454 seats (70%). The Muslim Brothers made a strong showing as they captured 88 seats (20%) – the highest number of seats an opposition group has captured over the past 50 years. The rest of the opposition parties combined won only 12 seats (3.4%); and the independents captured 6% of the seats. Though still in control with a two-thirds majority in the Parliament, the NDP's performance was astonishingly poor. In reality, the party candidates who ran on the NDP's lists won only 33.5% of the seats (they lost 287 out of 432 contested seats). The NDP was rescued only by allowing the winning party members, who were not originally nominated by the party and had to run as independents, to re-join the party, thus bringing its seats in the Parliament up to 314.

The Parliamentary elections have been revealing in many respects. They clearly show how far the regime would go with reforms. The Egyptian regime will allow reforms only as long as they do not alter the structures of power in the country. It is not willing to share power or allow for meaningful reforms that would weaken its grip over the system, the reform agenda, and the reform process. The poor performance of the state party equally proves that the overhauling process of the NDP that Gamal Mubarak has undertaken over

the past years has been meaningless. It has not enabled the party to gain popularity or connect with the ordinary people. The elections highlighted the place of the Muslim Brothers as the main opposition force in the country and allowed them to run on a broad pro-reform platform. As with regards to the secular and liberal opposition parties, the elections once again underscored their weaknesses in society and their inability to mobilize a sizeable popular support.

The Aftermath of the Elections: Can't Teach an Old Party New Tricks

Following the elections, several secular and liberal opposition parties began to disintegrate due to internal power struggles, as well as to regime intervention. Ayman Nour's newly established party, al-Ghad, split into two factions. Nour himself, a major contender against Mubarak during the September Presidential elections, was sentenced on December 24th to five-years in prison for allegedly forging membership signatures. The Wafd Party underwent a major rift, as members of its High Committee fired the party's leader, Noman Gouma, because of his authoritarian leadership style, triggering a potential split and the possibility of a freeze on the party's activities. The leftist Tagamou and the Nasserite Parties experienced major internal dissents and increasing calls for overhauling, after their poor performance in the Parliamentary elections.

The NDP too undertook a major reshuffling within its highest structures, as President Mubarak dismissed prominent elements of the party's old guards, expanded the membership of the General Secretariat, and appointed new members known to be close to his son Gamal. This move has been interpreted as marking the victory of the new guards, led by Gamal, within the party and as further consolidating Gamal's influence.

The Muslim Brothers, who appear to be coherent and to have their own vision of change, seem to adopt a pragmatic attitude. To avert a potential crackdown or down-sizing by the re-

gime, they have maintained a low profile since the elections. Their strong showing in the elections has raised concerns. They tried to address the concerns of the country's secular intellectuals and the Copts. They have continued to focus on a broad pro-reform agenda: limiting the powers of the president; removing restrictions on presidential candidacy; focusing on the monitoring role of the parliament; expressing willingness to join

the opposition block in the parliament; focusing on domestic issues and the needs of their constituency. When it comes to reforms, the year 2005 will be remembered as a year of both great hopes and enormous frustrations. The pro-reform movement seems to have built a momentum; there seems to be an agreement on a clear list of reform demands; the election process energized the whole political spectrum. On the downside, the re-

gime is still in control of the agenda, pace, and boundaries of reform; its ability to circumvent the domestic and external pressures remains unabated; its propensity to use force is high; and willingness to change the structures of power is remarkably low. At any rate, 2005 has brought in a clear political vitality that will have a long-term impact on Egypt's political life.