



CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT
for International Peace

POLICY OUTLOOK

Democracy and Rule of Law Project

October 2005

Opposition in Egypt

Performance in the Presidential Election and Prospects for the Parliamentary Elections

By Amr Hamzawy

Hosni Mubarak landed a sweeping 88.6 percent victory in Egypt's first multicandidate presidential election on September 7, 2005. The election represented a step forward on the road to open up a persistently autocratic regime. It revitalized the political scene and partially minimized citizens' apathy toward politics. However, to describe the election as an historical breakthrough (government position) or a substantial shift toward a new pattern of state-society relationship (pro-Mubarak media) is misleading. The election was not competitive, and its conduct partially violated democratic norms.

Egyptian opposition forces each reacted in different ways to the September 7 presidential election. Nine parties, most notably the liberal Wafd and the newly established Tomorrow, put forth candidates to compete against President Mubarak.¹ Other opposition forces, such as the Leftist Unionist Party and the Arab-Nasserite Party, chose to boycott the election by not fielding or endorsing a candidate. The Egyptian Movement for Change, Kifaya (Enough), took a similar position by encouraging Egyptians not to vote. In contrast, the banned Muslim Brotherhood called on citizens to participate in the presidential election without voicing explicit support for a candidate. Instead, the Brotherhood confined itself to making ambiguous statements which were interpreted as being against Mubarak and in favor of Tomorrow's candidate, Ayman Noor.

Notwithstanding reported irregularities on election day, the performance of Egypt's opposition was poor. Noor won only 7.6 percent of the vote, while Noman Gomaa, Wafd's candidate, won just under 3 percent. The remaining seven opposition candidates, combined, won less than 1 percent of the vote. As much as it demonstrated the limits of regime-led political reforms, the September 7 election also documented the marginal status of the opposition in Egypt which failed to mobilize enough support to challenge the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). In addition, the boycott strategy, pursued to curtail the peaceful transition to Mubarak's fifth term,² yielded no significant results.

The NDP's continued entrenchment in state institutions and the ongoing partial repression of political activity are major factors in the weakness of the opposition. Nevertheless, the

opposition forces' own internal weaknesses and miscalculations have also contributed to their problematic situation. Major opposition parties lack internal democracy and, in most cases, dynamic leadership. Their ability to reach out and attend to popular bases, in both rural and urban areas, is minimal. More importantly, during the last two years of state-led political reform, opposition parties have failed to develop clear answers to Egypt's pressing problems and thus could not ensure the support of the Egyptian electorate.

Opposition Parties: Between Boycott and Participation

The boycotting parties, primarily the Leftist Unionist and the Arab-Nasserite, based their position on the fact that the amendment of Article 76 of the Constitution, which opened the door for Egypt's first multicandidate presidential election, set nearly impossible conditions for independents to run³ and for opposition parties to get candidates on the presidential ballot from 2011 onward.⁴ Furthermore, the amendment did not provide for full judicial supervision of the presidential election but rather stipulated the formation of a presidential electoral commission composed of five judges and five public figures appointed by the NDP-controlled parliament. Finally, the unwillingness of the NDP to discuss abrogating the state of emergency⁵ prior to the election or to ease restrictions on forming parties made the decision to boycott appear consequential in the face of the uncompromising authoritarian conduct of Mubarak's regime. However, adopting the boycott strategy negatively impacted the opposition parties, which missed an opportunity to get their message out and revitalize their internal structures in the context of election campaigning. The question of whether an electoral boycott is a useful or a self-defeating tactic is often hard to answer, and opposition forces faced with an unlevel electoral playing field often struggle to find the right approach. In many cases, however, opting for a boycott, although tempting, results in the opposition parties failing to build support for their platforms and to subject the ruling elites to increasing popular pressure.

In contrast, parties that ran candidates on September 7 generally demonstrated a higher degree of political maturity because they took advantage of the expanded media attention afforded to them by the election. In particular, Wafd and Tomorrow's efforts to mobilize their constituencies reinvigorated them and signaled an important transition from reliance on closed-door discussions to meaningful participation in the political process. Wafd used its historical legacy⁶ as the party of secular Egyptian nationalism to reach out to urban middle class segments and Coptic citizens frightened by a state-tolerated Islamization of vital social spheres. The Tomorrow Party of Ayman Noor capitalized on its candidate's young age (41) to convince Egyptians of the viability of replacing the country's aging leadership with a dynamic group of professional politicians. Noor, a gifted speaker, designed an intensive election campaign which took him to every major city in Egypt and that efficiently used modern communication technologies.⁷

However, both parties failed to present original electoral programs or develop alternative visions to Mubarak's platform. Wafd's Noman Gomaa's vague remarks on how to reform Egypt offered no different substance than editorials in opposition newspapers; Noor's empty campaign promises and his personal attacks on Mubarak undermined his credibility. Rather than systematically addressing deteriorating socioeconomic conditions that, according to recent public opinion polls, represent the first priority of the Egyptian electorate, Gomaa and Noor along with other opposition candidates alienated the public by focusing on less accessible political reform measures. Therefore, it came as no surprise that opposition parties were unable to mobilize broad segments of the population to go to the polls on September 7.⁸

Another fundamental mistake on the part of Egyptian opposition parties was to invest a lot of time in the lead-up to the presidential election trying to build a grand national alliance against Mubarak's NDP. Although well intentioned, these efforts diluted the positions of key actors and confused the electorate. Operating in a semiauthoritarian political system with a dominant ruling party, Egypt's opposition should have worked to articulate clear electoral profiles and reach out to the public with distinct programs. To believe that united opposition fronts can better challenge autocratic rulers than autonomous parties ignores the vital need for each party to develop stable constituencies and to find its niche in an opening political space.

Contemporary experiences of democratic transition in semiauthoritarian regimes emphasize the need for the opposition forces to formulate a national consensus for change, which sets the direction of political reform and puts forward peaceful transfer of power through the ballot and neutrality of state institutions as the basic rules of the political process. Reaching a national consensus for change, however, does not presuppose the creation of opposition fronts united only by their members' eagerness to increase pressures on the autocratic ruling elite. Such overarching political constructs run the risk of turning into shallow political bodies where ideological considerations override their members' fundamentally varied perceptions and programs.

Opposition parties in Egypt disagree on an array of issues, including state control of the economy, scope of private enterprise in the public space, political role of religious movements, as well as foreign policy preferences. Absent well-defined platforms, Egypt's opposition is destined to lose credibility and remain unable to mobilize broad constituencies for political reform.

Opposition Movements: The Muslim Brotherhood and Kifaya

More successful than the aforementioned opposition parties were the Muslim Brotherhood and newly-established protest movements, especially Kifaya. In fact, both the Brotherhood and Kifaya gained considerably from their implemented strategies in the lead-up to the presidential election.

Throughout the last two years, the Brotherhood positioned itself at the forefront of opposition forces calling on President Mubarak to open up the political space and reduce repressive regime measures. Several reform announcements documented the Brotherhood's prodemocracy stance.⁹ Although the amendment of Article 76 of the Constitution ruled out the possibility of the Brotherhood running a candidate against Mubarak, its efforts to encourage Egyptians to vote in the presidential election were testament to the growing willingness within the movement to play by the rules, including those that exclude it from the sphere of legal political action. The Brotherhood's calculated move underlined its pragmatism and acceptance of the principle of gradual reform.

Kifaya and other protest movements,¹⁰ on the other hand, triggered an unprecedented dynamism in the Egyptian political scene throughout the last two years. Their very emergence demonstrated the ability of organized networks of activists to transcend state-imposed participation limits and engage in the political process. These movements capitalized on popular discontent with the ruling NDP, as well as with weak opposition parties, to lead a growing opposition to Mubarak's fifth term from the street. Significant numbers of Egyptians, who in the last decades hardly protested domestic politics in public,¹¹ were attracted by Kifaya's slogans and activities and took to the streets of major cities. The fact that these movements did not put forward well-defined sets of ideological inclinations

and focused primarily on lobbying for democratic reform measures empowered them to transcend major divides of the Egyptian political context. Their membership extended to liberals, leftists, Nasserites, Islamists, and well-known independent intellectuals. This profile generated public recognition and acceptance for the new movements and forced established opposition parties to reach out to them. In contrast to other boycotting parties, Kifaya's decision to call on Egyptian voters not to participate in the presidential election suited its objective of casting public doubts on Mubarak's fifth term and further radicalized the political discourse in Egypt's opposition scene.

Despite their relative success in reinventing the street as an arena for political action, nascent protest movements remained largely ineffective in terms of constituency building due to their limited appeal outside urban centers. Kifaya and its heirs clearly could not mobilize significant segments of the Egyptian middle class, which remained hostage to its own culture of fear and belief in the primacy of stability and security over political change, perceived as a synonym for social disorder.

Opposition from Within: The Role of Egypt's Judges

Egyptian judges represented a third source of opposition to Mubarak prior to the presidential election. They lobbied for the right to practice their constitutional power of monitoring the election independently¹² and pressed the government to amend the law regulating judicial power to gain more autonomy. Their prodemocracy actions corresponded to the general mood in the Egyptian public space and bolstered it. Prior to the September 7 election, judges spelled out conditions to ensure fair and transparent voting procedures, the most significant of which was to allow domestic nongovernmental organizations to observe the vote. Although the government hardly met these conditions, judges still monitored the election and retained the right to issue an independent report documenting its conduct. This choice represented the best middle ground between giving up their critique of the government's undemocratic position and following the recommendation put forward by different opposition forces for judges to boycott the election. Although the former was difficult given the public's faith in the judges' integrity, the latter ignored the fact that the judiciary still lacked the necessary institutional power to challenge the executive.

Authoritarian and semiauthoritarian regimes tend to concentrate power in the executive while manipulating the judiciary and the legislature to legitimize their policies, thereby restricting if not eliminating the autonomy of both institutions. The Egyptian regime is no exception in this regard. The demands of Egyptian judges, irrespective of their minimal outcome, signified a bold attempt by the judiciary to assert its institutional independence and put an end to the regime's exploitation of its credibility. They also increased internal pressures on Mubarak to enact meaningful reforms and restored, at least partially, the public image of neutral state institutions that promote political opening and risk confrontation with the regime.

Egypt's Upcoming Parliamentary Elections: Prospects for the Opposition

The dynamism in the Egyptian opposition continues to play itself out in the lead-up to the parliamentary elections, scheduled to begin on November 9, 2005, and last for almost three weeks. Recent statements from leading politicians suggest that opposition parties and movements regard the upcoming elections as the first real opportunity to contest the NDP's control over the People's Assembly and increase their representation from its current historic low of less than 10 percent.¹³

The strategies used by the opposition can be grouped into two main categories: creating a united opposition front and pursuing independent constituency building. Parties such as the Wafd, the Leftist Unionist,¹⁴ and the Arab-Nasserite, along with Kifaya are focused on running joint candidates to better challenge the NDP in all 222 election districts.¹⁵ In contrast, the Muslim Brotherhood and Tomorrow Party favor competing independently in a limited number of districts by fielding their own cadres.¹⁶ Tomorrow's Ayman Noor wants to capitalize on his relative gains from the presidential election from which he emerged as the strongest opposition figure. The Muslim Brotherhood, on the other hand, is not willing to compromise its strength in the Egyptian street by entering election alliances with junior partners and does not want to provoke Mubarak's regime through front-building tactics with other opposition forces.

Regardless of the performance of different parties and movements, the parliamentary elections will most probably yield better overall representation for the opposition. Taking all current circumstances into consideration, an election result leading to 15–20 percent opposition seats in the new People's Assembly is plausible. The scope and frequency of election irregularities, despite the government's refusal of international monitoring, are likely to diminish compared to previous parliamentary elections, given heavy domestic and international attention to the process. Most recently, Egyptian judges released a memorandum on October 7 stipulating new rules and regulations for monitoring the upcoming elections, stressing the need to conduct it over three stages in order to ensure judicial monitoring of all polls.

During his election campaign, Hosni Mubarak pledged to introduce substantial constitutional and political reforms which touched on most of the major demands in opposition platforms. He committed himself to replacing the quarter-century-old state of emergency with a more specific antiterrorism law, amending the constitution to limit the powers of the presidency, putting more oversight capacity in the hands of the judiciary and legislature, delegating more authority to his Cabinet, and initiating a new round of national dialogue on reform. Should President Mubarak instruct his government and the NDP to negotiate these steps with opposition forces in the new People's Assembly and to articulate specific timelines for their implementation, the parliamentary elections might be the opening act on a new stage of political change in Egypt. ■

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- ¹ President Hosni Mubarak was the National Democratic Party (NDP) candidate.
- ² Mubarak has ruled Egypt since 1981. In the last two decades, his mandate was renewed four subsequent times through a yes or no referendum.
- ³ The amendment stipulates that each independent candidate needs to collect 250 endorsing signatures from members of the People's Assembly (lower house of the parliament), the Shura Council (upper house of the parliament), and municipal councils. Currently, the NDP dominates all of them by greater than 90 percent majorities.
- ⁴ The amendment stipulates that each party would need to hold at least 5 percent of the seats in the People's Assembly to field a candidate.
- ⁵ The state of emergency has been in place since 1981.
- ⁶ The establishment of the Wafd Party dates back to the 1919 Egyptian Revolution against British colonial rule.
- ⁷ Ayman Noor's website, www.aymannoor.com, was the only serious Internet platform for an opposition candidate.
- ⁸ Official estimates put the voter turnout at 23 percent, while civil society organizations reported estimates ranging from 15 to 18 percent. Low voter turnout documents not only the failure of the ruling NDP to generate popular support for President Mubarak's fifth term, but also the weakness of the opposition.
- ⁹ Most significantly, the leader of the Brotherhood, Mohamed Mahdi Akef, announced on March 3, 2004, the Brotherhood's Reform Initiative, which called on the Egyptian government to rescind the emergency law and other restrictions on political activities and embark on the road to democratization.
- ¹⁰ Since 2004, various protest movements and alliances for change have been founded. In fact, in today's Egypt all relevant social groups, be it lawyers, journalists, university professors or artists, have prodemocracy platforms.
- ¹¹ In the 1980s and 1990s demonstrations typically took place in relation to regional events.
- ¹² Although the Egyptian Constitution clearly stipulates that the judiciary monitors elections independently, the government consistently restricts the judges' ability to do so.
- ¹³ Since the parliamentary elections of 2000, the NDP controls over 90 percent of the seats of the People's Assembly.
- ¹⁴ The Leftist Unionist Party long refused to join efforts to unify the opposition, out of ideological considerations primarily related to Islamist influence. Rifaat al-Said, party chairman frequently stated his opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood's participation in the political process. On October 7, 2005, the party changed its position and agreed to join a united opposition front.
- ¹⁵ Egypt's electoral system is based on single member district, first past the post.
- ¹⁶ For example Mohamed Habib, vice chairman of the Muslim Brotherhood, announced that his movement will run candidates in 150–170 districts. Tomorrow's total number of candidates is 128.