

The Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian Regime: The Test of Parliamentary Elections as a Condition for Political Transition

*Hossam Tammam**

The parliamentary elections due to take place this year represent a crucial juncture in the future of political life in Egypt. The previous round of elections (2005) confirmed the division of the political landscape between the ruling party and the delegitimized opposition movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, at the expense of the remaining political parties. However, the next round of elections brings the possibility of new, radical change as the regime moves to oust the Brotherhood from the political scene in order to ensure its own domination in the presidential elections (2011), which will be decisive for the future course of the Egyptian state. And this move may be concealed by the return of “formalism” to party political life.

The blow that the regime recently dealt to the Brotherhood, shortly after the elections to the Shura Council, can only be interpreted as an attempt to strip the organisation of the de facto legitimacy it has acquired over the past decades. It thereby seeks to transfer the Brotherhood from the category of delegitimized organisations to that of organisations that are outside the law. In such a case, the Brotherhood’s determination to run in the upcoming elections will be a test of the stability of the changes that have occurred within the movement over the past three years, in the face of its decades-long legacy of action in the public sphere.

It is no exaggeration to say that the parliamentary elections to be held in Egypt this year, 2010, are exceptional; they are perhaps the most important in the contemporary history

of the country as they will leave their mark on Egyptian political life as a whole, and even the entire Egyptian state.

* Researcher on Islamic movements

One important aspect of these elections is that they are supposed to confirm or redefine the shape of the next parliament and the dominant forces within it. Significant changes to the composition of parliament accompanied the previous elections (2005), which saw the retreat and even erosion of the political parties, including the large, veteran parties such as the Wafd Party, the National Unionist Party (Tagamu'), and the Nasserist Party, which won just eight of the 450 parliamentary seats. A further major development was the dramatic rise of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood organisation, which won 88 seats, representing 20% of the total, thereby confirming its standing as the country's largest opposition force. The Brotherhood has come to share the forefront of the Egyptian political landscape with the ruling party unopposed.

However, the significance of these elections lies primarily in the role they will play in the 2011 presidential elections, as the Egyptian regime is a presidential republic in which the majority of powers are concentrated in the hands of the president. According to the most recent amendments to the constitution in 2007, any independent candidate in the presidential elections must obtain the endorsement of 250 elected members of the People's Assembly, the Shura Council, and the local provincial councils, at least 65 of whom must be from the People's Assembly. Through this amendment, the regime is striving to ensure that the composition of the next parliament will preclude the Muslim Brotherhood specifically from exercising any influence, particularly since the political parties have little chance of having a real impact: no political party can put forward a candidate unless it has at least 5% of the membership of the People's Assembly and the Shura Council. This did not happen in the previous elections, and nor is it expected to happen this time.

The regime has established its full control over the local councils and the Shura Council (the second chamber). As such, the greatest challenge it now faces is how to assert full control over parliament - the sole means of dominating the presidential elections - by identifying potential candidates or their prospects of victory. The challenge facing the regime is particularly urgent given that the possibility of building broad political coalitions that agree on a single candidate who enjoys the approval of the public and the political movement as a whole has increased. This possibility was underscored by the entry of some big names into the candidates' race, headed by Mohamed ElBaradei, the former Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency. This development could allow the Muslim Brotherhood or other political forces that the regime regards as illegitimate to influence the selection of the next president of Egypt.

Moreover, the parliamentary elections are no less important for the Muslim Brotherhood itself. The organisation, which succeeded in the last elections in consolidating its position as the largest political power opposed to the regime, faces a serious challenge from the legal prohibition against it, which it has not succeeded in removing nor made serious efforts to do so. Thus it faces an existential question about the extent to which it can continue to play a part in political life as a force on the ground that is recognised but outlawed, in a blatant paradox. In the last elections, the Brotherhood won more than ten times more parliamentary seats than the other political opposition parties combined. However, all indications are that the shifts taking place on the ground are paving the way for its total exclusion from political life, participation and influence, after expectations that it would seek to find a way to integrate itself into the Egyptian political regime.

With the coming elections, the Muslim Brotherhood will either make the transition to establishing a decisive presence for itself within Egypt's political life that makes it hard to ignore, or the elections will be the gateway for the organisation's long-term exit from political life. If the fact that it won 20% of parliamentary seats did not earn it legal legitimacy, then its former configuration, with no investment in the legal situation, was like an ectopic pregnancy. In the absence of strong political parties the situation developed into a two-way contest between the regime and the Brotherhood, which is now on the verge of turning into a zero-sum conflict in which one side eliminates the other.

The Brotherhood's position towards the public sphere is not an exception, or related exclusively to its own will, but is largely the product of far-reaching transformations in the way the organisation reacts to events and developments in the political arena. Participation in the elections tops the Brotherhood's priorities in political life. However, since the early 1970s participation is not just connected to the desire of the Brotherhood so much as to the nature of the opportunities presented to it by the regime, according to the pre-determined rules of the political game.

The Content of Participation

The Muslim Brotherhood's long history of participating in the elections articulates the multiple strategies adopted by the movement in order to gain access to the available political outlets. This history began with the pivotal phase of the 1984 and 1987 elections, following which the Brotherhood endeavoured to gain control of the trade unions. This stage is critical as it saw the beginning of a change brought about by the entry of new blood into the organisation, as members of what was later known as the "public sphere movement" joined

its ranks. These members all belonged to the generation of the 1970s, the generation that established the Islamic movement on the campuses of Egyptian universities. These students entered the trade union struggle and revived the idea of participating in the system, which was originally introduced by the Brotherhood's first guide (*murshid*), Hassan al-Banna. It followed the organisation's attempts – following the release of its members from prison – to disassociate itself from the repercussions of the spread of ideas of isolationism from state and society, as prescribed by Sayyid Qutb, the Brotherhood's first, and perhaps only, theorist.

The Brotherhood's entry into the sphere of public work was a structural and intellectual product of these two factors. Thus the results of the new elections strategy will also be apparent at two levels: in the structure of the organisation, and in what can be termed the intellectual shift that often followed new facts on the ground. At the structural level, one can speak of the emergence of two major streams that split the Brotherhood: the first is the public sphere movement (open or reformist), which formed within the arena of students, unions and open political action, and is known as the "reformist" stream. The second is the organisational stream, which manages the Brotherhood's organisational structure and pulls the strings. This movement can be designated "conservative." At the level of ideas, the Brotherhood chose to join the category of political and social organisations by distancing itself from the use of violence as a means of effecting change. The Brotherhood strove to create de facto legitimacy, which has often been more important than the legal legitimacy that it failed to gain, in spite of its success in the elections.

The Context of the Regime

The context of participation, which was subject to shifts from time to time, was to alter its course, perhaps irreversibly, with the onset of 2007. The change began with the constitutional amendments, which were clearly aimed at excluding the Muslim Brotherhood from politics by underscoring the ban on the establishment of political parties of a religious character or that employ religious slogans, and at strengthening the standing of the political parties in the elections. This latter amendment came at the expense of the individual candidature model, which had been the Brotherhood's preferred, and at times only, means of participating in the elections, being a movement without a political party. A further provision was the cancellation of judicial review, which had been the principal guarantee of fair elections. The mid-term elections to the Shura Council (2007) ruled out a repetition of the scenario of the People's Assembly, and in 2008 the local elections sent out a definitive message that there was no place for the Muslim Brotherhood in the country's political landscape. The ongoing arrests and military trials, the liquidation of the economic institutions that fund the Brotherhood, and the media campaigns against the movement from the beginning of 2007, all signal that preparations for the phase we are now witnessing began early.

Indeed, the amendments, which affected many provisions of the constitution, from the article on the election of the president to that dealing with the electoral system, have underlined the special importance of the upcoming parliamentary elections, which will determine who holds the position of president of the republic. It is no longer possible for the regime to allow a repetition of the scenario of the 2005 elections, for two main reasons. Firstly, because the state of political polarisation has been extremely costly in terms of the media activity

and public visibility it garnered for the Muslim Brotherhood, through which it was portrayed as a strong organisation socially and the leading political opposition force. And secondly, the context that was suited to this scenario receded with the passing of the period of feverish change that swept through Egypt and the region at large. This period was clearly linked to the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood as the largest of the Islamic forces that profited from the increase in political openness in 2004. And this context was clearly connected to specific international approaches and the launch of projects aimed at "Middle East reform." Thus a remarkable transformation helped to lessen the rejection of Islamic movements within Western political circles, and the idea of dealing with them, and even integrating them into the political regimes of their states, won greater acceptance. Fear of the Muslim Brotherhood was no a longer sufficient reason to block the organisation's political presence, and the evolution in discourse and practice that came with this became a clear threat to the regime.

On the other hand, the amendments will have a major impact on the structure of political party life in Egypt. The regime will attempt to guarantee the composition of the new parliament in order to prevent the Brotherhood from becoming the source of a potential alliance, particularly following the announcement by its new guide of his willingness to enter into an alliance with political, social and cultural forces in the country (as in the case of an alliance initiated by the organisation in March 2004, which led to the formation of the "National Front for Change," which included the main opposition parties and the Kefaya movement). If established, such an alliance could support a potential nomination to the presidential elections in accordance with the conditions set

forth in the constitutional amendments. This presents a latent threat to the regime.

The Context of the Internal Situation

Following the political impasse between 1995 (when the campaign of arrests and military trials was launched against the Brotherhood) and 2005 (when the most important parliamentary elections that the Brotherhood ran in were held), the past five years saw the two streams within the organisation both make a strong appearance. A decisive turning point came with the elections to the Guidance Bureau and the election of the General Guide in late 2009, which resulted in the removal of reformist figures in favour of those who pulled the strings within the organisation. This development was to be expected in light of the constitutional reforms adopted by the political regime, which made clear that the Muslim Brotherhood's future chances of gaining enough seats in parliament had faded.

The interactions between the two wings of the movement (the conservative, organisational stream and the open, reformist stream) were not only the outcome of the last internal elections, which resulted in the selection of the Brotherhood's eighth guide from among what is known as the Qutbi current (in reference to the radical thought of Sayyid Qutb) and the takeover of the Guidance Bureau by the organisation's hawks. Indeed, one could contend that the elections merely reinforced prior developments that began within the movement's ranks, with the increasing appearance of reformist figures in the media and their frequent discussion of sensitive political and cultural issues. Thus the course of the internal elections made the debate within the Brotherhood public in an unprecedented manner.

This dispute appeared to reach a climax with the publication of the Muslim Brotherhood's

political programme for 2007. The programme was regarded as an appropriate response by the Brotherhood to the start of discussions over political reform in Egypt and the supposed role of the Brotherhood therein. It also clarified the organisation's desire, or at least its non-opposition, to its transformation into a registered political party, and thus its acceptance of the rules of the political game. The programme seemed clearly to reflect the powerful presence of the reformist current and the fact that it had benefited from the "spring" the country lived through from 2004 to 2006. However, the document's finishing touches and final production proved that at the critical moments, decision-making lay in the hands of the conservative stream. The organisation demonstrated its adherence to the Brotherhood's general approach of prohibiting women and Copts from serving as president of the republic and demanding religious oversight of the legislature. These are the main issues that have attracted criticism since the Brotherhood set forth its political platform. The siege imposed on the reformist stream within the Brotherhood's institutions has also continued. It was figures from the conservative, organisational stream that stood in the elections to the organisation's Shura Council in mid-2008, and five new members were appointed to the Guidance Bureau, all of whom were from the conservative stream. The reshuffle within the Muslim Brotherhood would come to an end with the internal elections of December 2009, which resulted in the complete isolation of the reformist stream after its most important figures – Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh and Mohammed Habib – departed the Guidance Bureau. However, the conservative stream was forced to put forward Al-Aryan as a solution, partially as a means of defusing the opposition's reaction but also due to its ability to keep in check the reformist tendencies of Al-Aryan, who always appears to be disposed to compromise.

The Context of the New Relationship

The series of blows that the regime has dealt to the Muslim Brotherhood are part of a clear strategy of weakening the organisation at critical junctures. The first campaign of arrests and military trials to which the organisation was subjected, in the mid-1990s, was perhaps an anticipated result of what was known as the "Salsabeel case" from late 1992. The case chronicled a qualitative transformation in relations between the movement and the regime, whereby the character of their interactions shifted from appeasement to a permanent but gradual, and sometimes limited, confrontation, depending on the surrounding context. However, the campaigns share two important common elements. First was the desire to reverse all the Brotherhood's gains and block all its attempts to exert a presence and expand. Hence the regime's subsequent targeting of the Brotherhood's economic forces and the siege it imposed on its sources of funding by arresting and then imprisoning the wealthiest businessmen affiliated with the organisation. The arrests included that of the Brotherhood's second deputy guide, engineer Khairat Shater, and his partner Hassan Malek, in May 2008. Second, the strikes aimed at the Brotherhood are not greatly affected by the international context; rather, they are concentrated on the spheres of influence into which the organisation expands and their relation to the development of the political regime, though the two have sometimes coincided, as they did during the last elections (2005).

The most striking feature of the current confrontation (2010) may be the fact that the Brotherhood figures targeted by the campaign are among the upper echelons of the organisation's leadership within the Guidance Bureau (three persons), including deputy guide Mahmoud Ezzat. It is rivalled in scale only by the strike against second deputy guide Khairat

Shater in 2007. However, the regime's insistence on targeting the conservative leadership in particular, including even Al-Aryan, suggests that it is continuing to pursue a strategy of inducing constant tremors within the organisation, but which do not go so far as to risk threatening it with schism or total collapse, in preparation for the phase of changes that is expected to follow the next round of parliamentary elections.

The most important point of disagreement is therefore the regime's pattern of reaction, which is almost equal to the preceding action of the Brotherhood. The organisation's heavy public and media presence, and the spotlights it has come to exploit in order to voice its stance on issues within the Egyptian political arena (including the Palestinian issue), means that the strike has come at the expected cost. This has especially been the case since internal elections were held within the Brotherhood, attracting the widest media coverage in the movement's history, and after the new guide intimated his desire to form an alliance with various political forces and parties at his inauguration ceremony. The current confrontation is an existential one, although it has not escalated to eradication of the organisation. The regime is aware that the cost of eliminating the Brotherhood would be considerable in the absence of a community-based alternative to the organisation, and the lack of a political programme feasible without it. This strike is therefore aimed at its presence in society as a whole, which is rivalled in importance only by the fate of regime itself. For this is a regime that, centred on the office of the President of the Republic, stands at the threshold of presidential elections that will play a significant role in determining its future. The seriousness of the confrontation explains why the charges against the Brotherhood this time have sought to evoke the history of its relationship with the Egyptian Islamic

movement, through the use of expressions related to violence, charges of apostasy, conspiring against the regime, privacy and secrecy, Qutbism, etc. These expressions are directly tied to the Nasserist period, which saw the largest campaign to eradicate the Brotherhood, then considered a threat to the regime and to the nascent revolution.

Therefore this strike can only be interpreted as an attempt to strip the organisation of the stamp of de facto legitimacy it has acquired over the past decades. It thereby seeks to transfer the Brotherhood from the category of delegitimised organisations to that of organisations that are outside the law. In such a case, the Brotherhood's determination to run in the upcoming elections will be a test of the stability of the changes that have occurred within the movement over the past three years, in the face of its decades-long legacy in action in the public sphere.

It can be argued that the developments that have taken place in recent years are not merely the tip of the iceberg, emerging like the internal dispute within the Brotherhood rising to the surface. A lot of water has passed under the

bridge in terms of progress made in the movement's political practice, which makes the idea of squandering the organisation's gains on the ground out of the question, even if the conservative stream continues to hold the reins of the organisation. It can be assumed that the movement will proceed according to the logic of ebb and flow of the political and social context. The movement alternates between appearing as a political party striving for legal legitimacy in contexts of openness, and reverting to the model of autocratic organisations that prefer to safeguard the status quo, so long as that precludes a state of sedition that would threaten both its own gains and those of the regime. Thus it can be argued that the choice of whether or not to have a presence at the heart of the political system and work from within it is a principle choice. However, it is a choice that will be determined by what options the Brotherhood has to negotiate the consequences of the current phase, whether they relate to the developments that have shaken it internally, or to the strategy of containment that the regime will pursue against it in the run-up to the upcoming parliamentary elections.