



## ***Bewildering Elections: Two Steps Forward, One Backward on the Way to Egyptian Democracy***

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**The success of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt's parliamentary elections, the crisis faced by the ruling party, the disintegration of the traditional opposition parties, and the unprecedented violence turned the elections into a turbulent operation. Yet this should not conceal the fact that the Egyptian political process has evolved tremendously.**

The 2005 parliamentary elections in Egypt were not an ordinary event of the kind that can be easily assessed. Although too many excesses occurred – especially in the third round – to make them “a democratic model”, the way they unfolded and their outcome were very revealing of the state of the political system, and opened the way to speculations on complex scenarios hitherto un-thought of. In fact, these elections disclosed a new political reality, which does not necessarily represent a dramatic qualitative transformation as in other countries or regions, but which brought about unprecedented and surprising developments, at least by Egyptian standards.

Parliamentary elections have always been a very serious issue in Egypt, in terms of candidacy, competition, spending and interferences, not because their results held possibilities of alternation of power, or any change in the political directions. Under a strong presidential regime and with a relatively weak legislative power, the continuation of the one-party hegemony, in addition to the individualistic nature of the electoral regimes and the voters' leanings within different constituencies, these elections represented more a social than a political phenomenon. They were a process by which the various forces within society sought to be represented within the State rather than one in which political forces would seek to be represented in the political system.

Elections thus related traditionally to social representation rather than political transformation.

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Although a major analysis trend still considers that the 2005 Parliament elections had the same traditional features linked to that “societal characteristic”, and even if the process was managed in the same manner, the final results of these elections nevertheless carry major political implications. The candidates of the ruling National Democratic Party faced more opposing voices than expected. The Muslim Brothers (Ekhwan Muslimeen) reaped the political fruits of their apparently a-political strategy of social action within their constituencies, while the secular political opposition groups will be facing a grim situation in the coming period. The new Parliament (People’s Council) will face political challenges and tasks of a national dimension. Its members are likely to be called on to decide on candidates in the next presidential elections, discuss projects of political reform and laws to regulate relations between different social forces. Thus, members of Parliament (MPs), elected for their capacity to serve the interests of their constituencies, might find themselves facing national tasks that they might not be able to avoid.

The main idea of this report is about the controversial electoral process that took place in Egypt, a process that led ultimately to very serious political results for the future of the political system.

They are analyzed here around two axes: first, the electoral process itself; second, the results and their implications for the prospects of democracy in Egypt.

## **The Electoral Process**

The Parliamentary elections raised many problematic issues concerning the electoral system itself, the degree of citizens’ participation and the way they were managed. These issues can be described as follows:

### **1. Political participation**

It appeared that there was no clear indication, in the Parliamentary elections, of the degree of citizens’ political participation, an old

problem on which fixed ideas were expressed in the past about the non-politicized situation in Egypt. Egyptians’ adherence to political parties does not exceed 10 percent according to a public survey undertaken by the Centre for Political and Strategic Studies in Al Ahram in 1977. The outcome of the 2000 Parliamentary elections also shows that the voting rate did not exceed 24 percent, a result reasserted by the 2005 presidential elections where the percentage of votes reached 26 % only. Analyses usually describe the citizens’ political tendencies in this regard as negative, under different interpretations, one of which is dissatisfaction with the way the elections were managed, especially the intervention of State security services. Citizens do not usually feel that their opinion matters or that “it would make any difference”.

The Parliamentary elections in 2005 indicate the following: that the Egyptian population, according to the last estimates (in July 2005) is 77.5 million inhabitants, with 45 million having the right to vote (those who are 18 and above), i.e. 58 percent of the total population. As for the number of citizens registered in the electoral registers, they reach 32 million people, representing 71 percent of those with the right to vote. Those who actually participated in the electoral process are estimated at 8.326 million representing 26.2 percent of registered citizens, which suggests that almost nothing has changed. Although this percentage is not “catastrophic” compared with average participation rates around the world (between 40 and 50 percent), it reveals a serious problem when compared with similar elections taking place in Iraq and Palestine where they sometimes exceed 75 percent.

However, some precisions around these results are worth underlining:

- Estimates concerning membership in political parties did not usually include the number of members in non-party movements, or so called “independents’ partisans”. For instance, those who voted for the Muslim Brothers’ candidates reached 1.9 million. Is difficult to check the number of the Movement’s members, as opposed to its

supporters, or those amongst them who cast a vote of protest against the National Party, but they represent a considerable active block that cannot be seen as negative.

- An important aspect of political participation has not been sufficiently stressed, namely the number of candidates to the elections. There was in fact an unusual increase in the participation as “candidates” in spite of the decrease in the number of voters. There were 5177 candidates including – and this is an important additional phenomenon – around 4423 candidates running as independent, i.e. a rate of 13 candidates for every seat, which produced two phenomena: tough competition and return on every round.

- The highly politicized climate in Egypt that started in February 2005 with President Mubarak’s speech calling for the amendment of Article 76 of the Constitution. At that date, registration had already ended. Therefore – and in addition to the numerous problems within electoral registers – this increased interest in political life did not translate into an increase in the number of voters who might have otherwise participated. It revealed the problem of voting with numbered ID cards as was the case in the presidential elections in fall 2005. Thus the figures are not ultimately indicative of the level of political participation.

- The third round of the ballot was disrupted by an outbreak of violence leading to the closure of polling stations in many regions, which led to a decrease in the voting rate compared with the previous two rounds, and affected mostly the Muslims Brothers’ voters. Estimates show that general participation could have been 2-3 percent higher, had the electoral tensions not worsened.

## **2. Elections management**

This was the most controversial aspect of the election and possibly the one decisive problem to the exclusion of others. It was not expected that the process would be very orderly, given the long history of turbulent

elections. But the results of the first round with the victory of 34 of the Muslim Brothers’ candidates and the heated debate around such constituencies as Dokki and Nasr city (inside and on the outskirts of Cairo) indicated clearly that something different was happening this time. This explains the public’s violent reaction when the great shift occurred in the management of the electoral process during the third round. The most important aspects that appeared during the 2005 elections can be described as follows:

- The role of the High Commission for the management of the elections was not clear. Much confusion prevailed around the bases for its establishment, its composition, prerogatives and behaviour during the election itself. Although the Commission was seen as the most important player in the process, the result was a blurred picture about what it did or did not do in managing the election. This issue is likely to gain importance in the next elections.

- The unprecedented level of spending was another new phenomenon, in spite of the formal legal constraints imposed on election financing. Spending estimates reached six billion Egyptian pounds, with direct vote buying, and vote pricing. There was a controversy over the percentage of businessmen among candidates and questions about the real motivation for their decision to run for elections.

- The role of judges in the management of elections and in the overall political process in Egypt constituted one of the major issues that emerged following the elections. Their presence helped maintain some standards of performance inside the committees, while there was a problem in having such a control outside. They also experienced tensions with the State services as well as among themselves. This issue touches the very structures of the political system and can potentially yield major changes, affecting the role of judges, either by considerably enhancing their role or reducing it.

- Outbreaks of violence, although not new - 15 citizens were killed against 60 in the 1995

elections- received very wide media coverage and more importantly, seemed much more organized and quasi systematic, compared with the traditional clashes between the candidates' partisans. Thugs, actually registered with the police as "dangerous characters" were used by all parties with the apparent aim of creating disorder in the committees. This form of organized violence strongly affected the final phase of the elections.

- The role of the police in the elections has always been a subject of debate in every election in Egypt. The police remained passive in the early phase and its role was seen as very negative, which led one of the judges to request the army's intervention to protect the committees. Later, in the third round, the police intervened directly to close polling stations after the terrible defeat of the Party against the Muslim Brothers in the second ballot (42 seats for the Brothers against 35 for the Party), which added to the problems faced by the judges.

The actual effects of such factors on the elections results need to be examined further. Ultimately, the General Commission was not very effective; the campaign financing was not decisive in affecting the results; the role of judges was positive by every indication, at least during the first two rounds; violence affected the third round of the elections and the image of the elections outside Egypt; and the security services intervention had a direct effect on the results of the third round. All in all, the results of the electoral process reflected the strength of its different protagonists.

### **The Results of the Parliamentary Elections**

One of the most problematic issues in Egypt is the extent to which the Egyptian people are ready for and demand democratic change. This issue should be examined in light of some official statements such as that of Prime Minister Ahmad Nazeef – which he later withdrew - and academic opinions stressing

illiteracy rate, the lack of pressure from citizens and the government's orientations. These arguments about the negative environment were faced in the past with strong responses referring to the national dignity but also to the pre-1952 liberal experiment in Egypt, the experiences of other countries like India, or less developed countries in Africa and the Arab region, as to how the democratic process is basically linked to political awareness and that such awareness is undoubtedly present among the layman who speaks with much criticism about everything and seems ready to truly participate as soon as he has an opportunity that he deems "useful". In addition, the rate of participation in rural areas and amongst the politically active women of the Muslim Brothers Movement, as well as the rush that led to acts of violence in many constituencies, all point in the same direction.

What is really interesting is that the results of the parliamentary elections in the last rounds confirm the existence of a strong trend in favour of change, contrary to what appears sometimes on the surface. One of the most important electoral phenomena of the 2005 elections is the "fall of the big symbols" from major political parties such as Yusuf Wali, Mohamad Abdullah, Ahmad Abu-Zaid, Sayyed Rashed, Khaled Muhyeddin, Abu El Ez al-Hariri and Al-Badri Farghali, while some of them were able to rescue their seats by forming alliances with the Muslim Brothers. More importantly, almost 75 percent of the former Parliament members (of 2000) lost their seats during the 2005 elections by 80 percent and sometimes 100 percent in some provinces. It is therefore clear that voters chose to operate a radical change and eliminated most of their representatives, and consequently of the composition of the legislative power, in spite of all the negative factors surrounding the electoral process.

In this regard, an analysis of the results of the parliamentary elections and the consequent changes for the political map in Egypt, lead to the following:

- The National Democratic Party was not able to gain a majority with its main list. In

fact, the ruling party was confronted with reality during these elections, even though the final results indicate that it obtained 311 seats, i.e. 72 percent of the Parliament, which represents for the Party that “majority” that it had been seeking since the beginning. The reality is that the National Party effectively won only 145 seats through its main list, securing 32.3 percent of the Parliament seats. It only obtained that “comfortable majority” by re-integrating the 166 independent members who had left the party to stand for election on their own behalf because they had been excluded from the Party’s initial list. These candidates won 56, 5 percent of the total seats. The National Party remains in the lead but has lost its position as the powerful hegemonic ruling party as was the case before. It is now a party with a majority in Parliament.

This is the second time that the Party secures a majority by re-integrating independent candidates. In the 2000 elections, the Party obtained 38.9 percent of the seats, then reintegrated the independent candidates who won at that time 53.3 percent of the total seats. This is an indication of a decrease - from 38.9 to 32.3 percent - in the capacity of the Party to secure a majority by relying only on its main lists. This time the Party faced a real problem in the elections with the independent candidates who joined it afterwards and with the Brothers’ candidates with whom some of its members formed alliances in order to win. In spite of all attempts to introduce changes within the Party, it faced a serious crisis due to the internal struggle in which the old guard seems to have maintained its control over the so-called reformist trend. The phenomenon of independent candidates is indicative of the serious internal tensions. Some contesting voices amongst the voters countered the Party’s candidates in the constituencies. Thus, had the Party not re-integrated independent successful candidates, it would have lost its majority and become an ordinary political force with only one third of the Parliament seats.

- The rise of the Muslim Brothers Movement in the political system is of course the other major feature of this election. There were some surprises concerning the Muslim Brothers Movement in the 2005 elections. First, they decided very early on to participate with a large number of candidates (almost 150 candidates) capable of winning under the slogan “participation not competition” that aimed at avoiding scaring the other parties. They then run their campaign on the slogan “Islam is the solution” and openly used the name of the Muslim Brothers Movement, with no intervention on the part of the State security services to try to hinder their campaign as was the case in previous elections. More importantly, they were able to defeat many of the big symbols of the National Party with huge differences in the number of votes within different constituencies. They won 88 seats representing 23 percent of the total seats, against around 17 seats in the 2000 elections. Some analysts even considered that they would have been able to simply exceed the 100 seats threshold, had there not been administrative interferences in the third round.

The strong rise of the Muslim Brothers was not just an electoral phenomenon limited to the Parliamentary elections. It has marked a major transformation of the political map and system. For the first time, there is no political force excluded from legality any more. The popular basis of the Muslim Brothers turned out to be more important than expected. This non-party movement became the second political force in Egypt, with around 1.9 million voters out of 8.3. The significant figure here is that among candidates who stood for election on the Muslim Brothers’ lists, 58.6 percent were elected. This ascent of the Movement raised a wide debate in Egypt that went beyond questions around the future of the regime to touch on that of the State itself. In this discussion, all the crucial issues were raised about relations between religion and the State, between the government and the opposition, and the future of the political reform process. Interpretations of the

Brothers' ascent were diverse, but the discussion around the importance of social action in parallel to political action might lead to major transformations in the way political action is conceived.

- The secular opposition parties collapsed. Parties such as the Wafd, the Tagammu' party, the Ghad party, the Nasserite party, with liberal, leftist or nationalist tendencies, faced a difficult challenge. This problem not only shook their position in the political system but also affected their very existence and presence on the political map especially with the rise of the Muslim Brothers who could, thanks to elements unknown to them, win over most of the opposition candidates, including some of their historical leaders and symbols such as Khaled Muhyeddin, Dhya' eddin Daoud and Munir Fakhri Abdelnour. These parties could only win a total of 11 seats in Parliament, representing 3 percent of the Parliament (6 for the Wafd, 2 for the Tagammu', 2 for the Ahrar, and 1 for the Ghad, in addition to 2 for the Karama (Dignity) party under formation, the Nasserite party did not win any seat). Although they were vocal, took clear political lines and presented coherent platforms in comparison with the rest of the political elite, it appeared that their position in Egyptian society is very modest and that they suffer from structural weaknesses. There is no indication as to whether they will be able to deal with these weaknesses in the coming period.

The crisis of the ruling party as well as the rise of the Muslim Brothers represented two new features in the political system: the

weakness of civil opposition at the organizational and intellectual levels, and its concentration on political action and lack of interest in social action. A third factor that led to speculations about the future of political life in Egypt is the potential for new civil parties to emerge representing a third trend between the ruling trend and the religious trend, especially that all those who participated in elections do not represent more than 26 percent of the registered citizens and 18.5 percent of those who have the right to vote. The likelihood of this option depends on the ability of existing opposition parties to overcome their current crisis, and come up with new formulas that would be different from those of the "national rally" in the framework of which they stood for election with very limited result in spite of what they used to represent politically.

In spite of all the difficulties and downsides described here about the way the electoral process was managed revealing more democratic problems than a democratic transformation, the final results of this process and their implications for the current and future situation of the political system, all indicate that a somehow important development has taken place. The attempts at sabotaging the elections in the final phase and the trial and imprisonment of Ayman Nour cast a shadow on the image of the overall electoral process, but they did not stop the development taking place, sometimes against the will of everybody.

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