



# Polling for power

Recent elections in Egypt and Turkey have enabled their leaders to consolidate their rule

**APPEARANCES TO** the contrary, not all states and regimes in the Middle East are collapsing. Recent elections in Egypt and Turkey produced the results desired by their respective presidents – Egypt’s Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

For Sisi, the nationwide elections for parliament completed the restoration to power of Egypt’s authoritarian “deep state” and reinforced his status as unchallenged leader; for Erdoğan, his Justice and Development Party (AKP) regained its absolute majority in parliament and thus ensured his continued unrivaled status.

Although they’d both loathe the comparison, the resemblances between their leadership styles and modus operandi are noticeable: the tethering of the judicial system to their needs; the hounding and persecution of critics and cracking down on independent media; the promotion of a personality cult, and the pronounced tendency to blame their countries’ troubles on dark foreign conspiracies.

To be sure, unlike in Turkey, the election results in Egypt were preordained, as the Muslim Brotherhood had been branded a terrorist organization and its leaders imprisoned – beginning with the deposed president of the country, Mohamed Morsi. Since the mass demonstrations and military coup that overthrew Morsi in July 2013, Sisi had worked assiduously to consolidate his full control over the state’s apparatus and legitimize his rule by cracking down on the Brotherhood, initiating a big-ticket economic project – the widening of the Suez Canal – and draping himself with the mantle of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the legendary charismatic Egyptian leader.

Having already been elected president and promulgated a new constitution in 2014, Sisi acted to complete his much ballyhooed “Road Map to Democracy” by reviving the institution of parliament (the last one had been dissolved in 2012).

Although the various rounds of the staggered election are only now being completed, Sisi has succeeded in fashioning a compliant parliament, filled almost entirely with allies and supporters from the country’s security, business, political and media elites, and utterly marginalizing established political parties. The Salafist al-Nour party, which had finished second to the Muslim Brotherhood’s party in the 2011 elections with 27 percent of the vote, suffered heavy losses, partly thanks to the state-orchestrated “No to Religious Parties” campaign, and the secular-left opposition Tagammu and Nasserist parties were completely shut out.

With the results never in doubt, and the public exhausted from the upheavals of 2011-13, voter turnout was a scant 26 percent and much lower still among young voters – the now disillusioned Tahrir Square generation. Overall, the election signified the death, for now at least, of competitive politics in the country.

Unlike Egypt, Turkey has a long, albeit checkered, history of genuinely competitive multi-party politics. Unhappy with the results of June elections that prevented him from governing without rival parties, Erdoğan tried again, after first resuming all-out military op-



MOHAMED ABD EL GHANY / REUTERS

A woman casts her vote at a polling station during the runoff to the first round of parliamentary elections in Imbaba, Egypt, October 27

erations against Kurdish PKK insurgents.

Playing the nationalist-patriotic card and an apparent desire for stability among Turkey’s anxious public, Erdoğan’s AKP managed to confound the pollsters who had predicted a rerun of the June results, gaining an additional five million votes, nine percent more than in June, and nearly 50 percent of the total votes cast. In contrast to Egypt, voter turnout was 85 percent, indicating the public’s high degree of politicization and belief in the election’s importance.

The AKP now controls 317 of the 550 seats in parliament, enough to rebuff all challenges, although its ability to alter the constitution to create a presidential system that would grant Erdoğan much wider powers is still not ensured.

Of course, Sisi’s and Erdoğan’s electoral achievements hardly guaranteed success in coping with the myriad challenges they face.

Sisi’s Egypt is not close to being a truly strong state in which state institutions and civil society reinforce one another according to broadly accepted principles under the rule of law. The Egyptian economy, already on life support, was dealt a heavy blow by the terrorist bombing of a Russian passenger airliner in Sinai. In addition to the huge damage caused to the tourism industry, the bombing served as a reminder that the radical Islamist insurgency in Sinai, now affiliated with the Islamic State, is still very much alive.

While much stronger institutionally and economically, Turkey also confronts a host of fundamental problems, including a troubled economy, deep sociocultural fissures, the unresolved Kurdish question, and the spillover of the Syrian and Iraqi chaos into Turkey. Building a consensus within Turkish society to address these problems is an essential prerequisite for success, but such a strategy has never been part of Erdoğan’s playbook. ■

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