

Egypt's Parliamentary Elections: The Death of Politics? ¹

Joyce van de Bildt

Egypt is in the midst of its first parliamentary elections since the army's ouster of President Mohammed Morsi more than two years ago. These elections constitute the third and final phase of Egypt's "Roadmap to Democracy," which General (now President) 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi unveiled after Morsi's overthrow. A comparison between the current parliamentary elections and those held in 2012, one year after the 2011 revolution, reveal striking differences. Voter turnout in the first round of the latest elections was less than half of that in 2012, and the parties that were victorious in 2012 – the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi "al-Nour" party – are now banned from politics and marginalized. Pro-government political parties and independents affiliated with the former Mubarak regime dominate the current elections. At the same time, some of the movements that were dominant actors in the 2011 revolution have boycotted the elections. Consequently, Egyptian journalist and political scientist Hani Shukrallah raised the question of whether the parliamentary elections signified "the death of politics in Egypt."² Indeed, the current elections highlight the dearth of political participation and genuine representation in Sisi's Egypt.

The exceptionally low voter turnout raises many questions. After the first day of voting on October 18, a meager 10 percent of eligible voters had cast their ballots. After two days of voting, official reports announced a total turnout of 26 percent. Even this relatively low number struck some observers as inflated, based on continuous reports of empty polling stations. Turnout was low despite the fact that officials, including Sisi himself, had called on citizens to come out and vote, and gave public employees half a day off from work to do so. Free transportation to polling stations was available for citizens in some parts of the country. The Egyptian Ministry of Religious Endowments even instructed imams

¹ This phrase was coined by Hani Shukrallah in his op-ed "[Egypt: Revolution, repentance and rest.](#)" *Ahram Online*, October 21, 2015.

² Hani Shukrallah, "[Egypt: Revolution, repentance and rest.](#)" *Ahram Online*, October 21, 2015.

to use the October 16 Friday sermon to urge citizens to vote.³ Pro-regime television hosts were also calling on the people to come out and vote, denouncing and insulting those who did not.⁴

The absence of Egyptian youth, in particular, from the polling stations begs the question of what happened to the political fervor and revolutionary movements that were so prominent in the 2011 revolution. Some explain low turnout in practical terms, such as the difficulty of having to travel to one's original voting district to vote, and the nature of the new electoral system, which is generally described as "complicated and confusing."⁵ However, there are other, underlying reasons why these parliamentary elections have thus far been characterized by a disinterested public.

First, regime critics argue the lack of competition for the pro-government political parties renders the parliamentary elections futile. Indeed, electoral candidates are predominantly supporters of the current regime. The winner in the first round of elections, the "For the Love of Egypt" (*Fi Hob Misr*) list, is not officially affiliated with the president, but has declared its loyalty to Sisi and is widely believed to have the state's support. Led by ex-General Sameh Seif al-Yazal, For the Love of Egypt is an alliance of political parties and independents, and includes former state officials, former military officers, journalists, and businessmen. It secured all sixty seats for party lists in the first round of voting, while affiliated candidates won almost ninety individual seats. Among the leading parties in the alliance are the "Free Egyptians Party," led by Coptic businessman Naguib Sawiris; the youthful "Homeland Future Party" that was founded by the 24-year old Mohammed Badran; and the venerable Wafd party. The "Egyptian Front Coalition" is another contestant in the elections, fielding candidates closely related to the former Mubarak regime.

The pro-Sisi parties face little competition, in part because of the regime's suppression and sidelining of opposition parties. Secular movements that view themselves as embodying the principles of the 2011 revolution, such as the "April 6 Youth Movement" and Mohammed al-Baradei's "Constitution Party," boycotted the elections. Some of its leaders are imprisoned and were unable to run for election. But the boycott is also an attempt to undermine the regime's legitimacy and draw attention to its lack of popular support. In an atmosphere where the government has prioritized security concerns over individual

³ Muhamed 'Antar, "['Al-Awqaf' devotes coming Friday sermon to 'positive participation in the elections'](#)," *Shorouknews*, October 12, 2015.

⁴ Examples are listed in this blog entry from October 18, 2015: "[Parliamentary elections Day 1: Where are the voters!?](#)".

⁵ For more details on the technical rules of the elections, see Pasha Magid, "[Elections explainer: A map to the madness](#)," *MadaMasr*, October 16, 2015.

freedoms, opposition parties in Egypt have been marginalized. Likewise, the array of platforms available to express political views has been drastically reduced in recent years by tight monitoring of the media, restrictions on political activity at the universities, and a draconian anti-protest law enacted in November 2013 that gives the government broad discretionary powers to prevent and criminalize protests.

As for the Islamist groups, the Muslim Brotherhood has been suppressed since Sisi deposed Morsi in 2013 and is listed as a terrorist organization, while many of its senior leaders are imprisoned, sentenced to death, or in exile. The Sisi government and state sponsored media have consistently demonized the Muslim Brotherhood, and the government continuously emphasizes its determination to conduct a war on terror. The Muslim Brotherhood's "Freedom and Justice Party" (FJP) was banned from the elections, and it called on its supporters not to participate in the voting. After the first round, the FJP interpreted the low voter turnout as a "broad popular boycott," which it applauded on its website with the following statement: "The people have spoken, reiterating their rejection of military rule, ignoring the traitorous murderer's call for them to participate in his farcical elections, and left him, his gang, and his media tentacles to lament, complain, and make accusations against one another."⁶ Other Islamist parties, such as the "al-Wasat Party" and the "Strong Egypt Party," also decided to boycott the elections.

The Salafi "al-Nour" party was the only Islamist party to participate in the elections. Yet, it only participated in two out of four geographical districts. This is likely the result of a delicate balancing act that the party is playing in face of opponents who accuse it of seeking to take over the parliament "like the Muslim Brotherhood did."⁷ Al-Nour faced smear campaigns in the media as well as attempts to dissolve it. A popular campaign called "No to religious parties," initiated by the *Tamarod* movement, gained momentum during the weeks preceding the elections. It collected signatures in order to convince the authorities to dissolve religious political parties. The campaign was clearly aimed at the ultraconservative al-Nour party, and gained support from Egypt's Ministry of Endowments. To be sure, the 2014 constitution contains a ban on religious parties, however, al-Nour has insisted that it is not a religious party, but only has a religious background and focuses on socio-economic issues. It should be noted that al-Nour also faces opposition from other Islamists who consider the party a "traitor," following its support for Sisi in his ouster of Morsi. This issue has also divided the party internally, as does the question of political participation in

⁶ "[Egypt Pro-Democracy Alliance Calls 'Indomitable Will, Unstoppable Revolution' Protest Week](#)," Official Website of the Freedom & Justice Party, October 23, 2015.

⁷ Passant Rabie, "[Nour Party struggles forth, despite all odds](#)," *MadaMasr*, September 25, 2015.

general. Since its establishment in 1984, and until 2011, *al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya* has refrained from participation in politics because it considered it un-Islamic. After the 2011 revolution, it founded al-Nour reportedly in order to protect Egypt's Islamic identity. Nevertheless part of al-Nour's support base may not view the political process as viable, especially in the current environment. In the first round of the elections, preliminary results indicated major losses for the party.

Clearly major branches of society will not be represented in the new parliament, and those candidates that will win seats are pro-government and unlikely to present reform agendas. On top of that, the parliament is not expected to exert any substantial power or to serve as a real check on the government. Upon taking office, its members are supposed to review, within fifteen days, the laws that Sisi and his interim predecessor had introduced while the parliament was not in session, which number more than two hundred. It is "an impossible task," according to Sameh Seif al-Yazal who heads the For the Love of Egypt coalition. He has already declared that the available time period for approving the laws will be too short and that therefore the parliament "should approve these laws and debate them afterwards."⁸

In addition, the current electoral system is likely to weaken the position of political parties: 75 percent of the parliamentary seats will be allocated to individual candidates and only 20 percent to closed party lists, while the remaining 5 percent of the seats will be appointed by the president. Individual candidates do not have to be affiliated with a political party. Therefore, the current elections could increase the number of unaffiliated, provincial candidates in parliament. These unaffiliated candidates are likely to pursue a narrow legislative program at the expense of a national agenda, which may further divide and weaken the parliament. These independents are also more likely to organize their campaigns around personal appeal and networks, instead of formulating broad political programs. Indeed, because of a lack of emphasis on political programs, crucial topics went unaddressed in the public debate during the election campaign. The electoral system also benefits individuals with money, power, and tribal connections, and hence favors elites over young revolutionaries. To be sure, these concerns seem less serious now than they did a few weeks ago, because in the first round of voting half of the individual seats were actually won by candidates affiliated with political parties. Yet 222 independent seats remain to be determined in the second round of voting in the coming weeks.

⁸ Lin Noueihed, "[Former Egyptian General sees his bloc leading new parliament](#)," *Reuters*, October 8, 2015.

All of these developments have given rise to disillusionment with Egyptian politics and with the prospects for real democracy. Egyptian youth especially have expressed dissatisfaction with the situation. On social media, they mocked the electoral process and the low turnout, which was illustrated by the various “hashtags” trending during the elections. One popular hashtag on Facebook and Twitter was “#mahdish_raha” (Nobody is going), accompanied by photos of empty polling stations for example. The slogan “mahdish raha” even inspired a song that was uploaded to YouTube and that mocks President Sisi.⁹ Another popular hashtag was “#Badala_ma_tantakhibu (Instead of voting...), accompanied by amusing suggestions of things to do instead of voting. Ahead of the elections, a boycott campaign was launched on Facebook and Twitter under the slogan “Long live justice in Egypt,” calling for Egyptians to vote for the “Glory to the martyrs” list — or, in other words, not to participate in the legislative elections and hence to ‘vote,’ symbolically, for the victims that had died during several political events in the post-revolution period.¹⁰ For Egypt’s youth, this campaign reflects a general resentment that major demands of the 2011 uprising have not been met, especially in relation to social justice, freedom, and unemployment.

The second and final round of voting in the Central and East Delta regions will take place between November 21 and December 2, with the final results expected on December 4, 2015. Hani Shukrallah concluded his article on the death of politics in Egypt with the rather optimistic note that despite current developments, he does not believe that Egypt is “back to yet another 30 years of a soulless political desert ruled over by businessmen and bureaucrats.”¹¹ Yet, the first round of parliamentary elections does indicate that many Egyptians may not believe that their vote counts in Egyptian politics today. Although these elections were the third step in Sisi’s roadmap to democracy, they actually appear to constitute a return to autocracy in Egypt, with the presidency remaining the main seat of power in the country. The lack of real opposition, the weakness of the political parties, the sidelining of the opposition, and the limited influence that the parliament is expected to exert have resulted in the voting public’s widespread disillusionment with the political system.

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⁹ “The official election song ‘Nobody’s going’, published on YouTube on October 19, 2015.

¹⁰ Nadine Thabit, “‘Glory to the martyrs’ list for the election of the late symbols of the Egyptian Revolution”, *Al Araby*, October 17, 2015.

¹¹ Hani Shukrallah, “Egypt: Revolution, repentance and rest,” October 21, 2015.

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