



Egyptian parliamentary elections and the political path

Arab Forum for Alternatives

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Unlike previous cases, the last parliamentary elections in Egypt saw the participation of almost all political factions and were boycotted by the Muslim Brotherhood and their supporters, several youth and revolutionary movements, and a considerable number of non-politicized citizens. This was clearly demonstrated in the discrepancy between the turn out in the 2015 elections and 2012 elections, the latter being held right after the 2011 revolution.

Free and fair elections?

The 2012 and 2015 elections saw a major transformation as far as freedom and fairness are concerned, especially when compared to the violations committed in previous rounds before the 2011 revolution. Rigging was almost absent across polling stations and violations were rather attributed to the lack of organization and mismanagement or the inability to monitor lobbying activities practiced right outside the polling stations.

The 2015 violations mostly took place outside the polling stations and very few inside unlike the 2010 elections that witnessed the most flagrant actions of systematic rigging by state institutions both inside and outside polling stations.

All political factions took part in the 2012 elections and most violations took place outside the polling stations, while not all political factions took part in the 2015 elections and there were more violations despite the fact that the so-called “transparency of the ballot box,” which means no vote rigging, was maintained in both.

There is no doubt that a substantial transformation took place after the January 2011 revolution as systematic rigging disappeared, but was replaced by vote buying in the 2015 elections as well as flagrant media violations where specific candidates who were not endorsed by state security institutions were directly slandered. The electoral law that was applied to the 2015 elections was defective since it did not guarantee a fair representation of different echelons of the Egyptian society and was rather designed to secure the victory of pro-regime factions.

The worst electoral law:

In order to understand the current structure of the Egyptian House of Representatives, it is important to look at the electoral law according to which the elections were held and which was issued shortly before the start of the elections.

Several law drafts that take fair representation into consideration were submitted to the executive power, represented by the government and the presidency. Such laws proposed a combination between individual candidacy and party lists, yet where the latter gets a bigger percentage than the former. Yet none of those proposals were accepted and a law that was described as one the worst was issued instead. This law did combine individual candidacy and party lists, yet gave the first 448 seats, and the second 120 seats, distributed among four lists across the entire country.

In individual candidacy, the division of constituencies was in the best interest for candidates who are willing to pay bribes, tribal affiliations, and list candidates who were sure to win.

This was done through decreasing the size of electoral constituencies, thus increasing their number. This part of the law totally overlooked the fact that in a country like India with a population of 1 billion and 200 million the parliament is comprised of 550 members and not 600 like the Egyptian parliament after adding the 5% the president has the right to appoint.

There was also a remarkable discrepancy in the division of constituencies in the law. There were 119 constituencies that got two seats, 77 that got one seat, and 35 that got three while the rest got four seats, which indicates a “by-the-piece” kind of logic that does not look at the bigger picture and does not take into consideration the whole political spectrum. This, unfortunately, is the logic according to which most laws are still issued. It sounds more logical for an electoral law that is issued for the entire country not to be designed according to the size of individual constituencies, counties, or neighborhoods and that it should, instead, offer a unified system for the whole country. This, for example, could have been done through stating that there is a candidate for every 300,000 voters or two candidates for every 600,000, which was how constituencies were divided before. The current law, on the other hand, leads the entire process to be chaotic.

The system of absolute lists in the new law reduced the lists into only four across the country and not a list for each governorate as one of the proposed draft laws suggested. This would have meant having 27 lists, each of which representing a governorate, which in turn means a proper competition between different political factions, each of which winning one or two lists. Instead, the competition was confined to only four lists and the result was determined from the very beginning in favor of state-endorsed lists.

Meanwhile, political parties were weak, thus unable to form lists that can compete in a 10-million-strong constituency and it was well-known that large lists can only be won by the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists or entities supported by security institutions. Since the Muslim Brotherhood was no longer part of the equation and with the absence of strong civil parties, security institutions became fully and unilaterally in control of forming electoral lists. This was not what happened before when the ruling party took part in selecting candidates and designing the electoral system. The state-endorsed list was called For the Love of Egypt and it scored a sweeping victory, especially that some of the other lists could not compete in all four electoral divisions.

Who boycotted the elections?

It is important to distinguish between boycotting and abstention. While both involve the same action, the logic behind each of them is totally different. The Muslim Brotherhood was among the most prominent factions that boycotted the elections and other Islamist parties followed suit with the exception of the Salafi al-Nour party. This meant the absence from the electoral scene of the most organized of political factions and one that took part in all elections held in the country since 1984 and until the 2012 elections. The Muslim Brotherhood had also lost a great deal of popular support at the time of the 2015 elections.

The latest parliamentary elections are indicative of the participation of youths in the political scene. The turnout in the 2015 elections did not exceed 25% in both the first and second

stages. This means that a large number of youths abstained from voting and some statistics show that only 29% of youths voted.

There is no doubt that there is a connection between the interference of the military on July 3, 2013 and the stance taken by a considerable number of youths who belonged to civil and revolutionary factions. They decided to withdraw from the political scene and resort once more to the virtual world in what can be seen as a reenactment of its pre-January 2011 experience when youths used social media as a means of political mobilization and managed through doing that to play a major role in the eruption of the revolution. For youths, virtual space is where they can express their views freely and engage in debates with other youths, including those who belong to different ideologies. It also offers a means of withdrawing from reality.

It was through virtual space that an electronic campaign was launched to call for boycotting the elections and a list called Glory to the Martyrs, which contained the names of martyrs of the January 2011 revolution, was compiled. The motto of the campaign was “My vote goes to martyrs.” The campaign was quite influential and several factions and parties announced boycotting the elections in addition to Islamists and youth movements. Each had a different reason for the boycott. For example, the Strong Egypt party, chaired by former Muslim Brotherhood leading member Abdel Moneim Abul Fotouh announced that its decision to boycott the elections is based on two pivotal points: the first is the climate in which the elections were taking place and the second is the laws issued by the regime that the party rejects, whether the elections law or other laws that undermine freedoms such as the protest law or the extension of the maximum time for detention without trial. The Wasat party boycotted the elections also because of the general political climate as well as the imprisonment of many of its members. The Islamist Construction and Development Party boycotted because of the role it expected money to play in the victory of specific candidates and the return of many figures from the Mubarak regime and the formerly ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) to the political scene. The Dostour Party, established by Mohamed al-Baradei and one of the members of the opposition Democratic Trend, cited the unconstitutionality of the elections law, the system of dividing constituencies, and the arrest of a large number of youths, all of which are factors that made the party skeptical about the implementation of an actual democratic transition. The Egypt’s Awakening coalition, which was to compete with two lists, withdrew from the elections after the Administrative Court rejected its request to repeal the decision to repeat medical checkups for candidates and which was going to cost the coalition huge amounts of money. This list was independent from the state and was, therefore, supported by a limited number of businessmen.

Analyzing the numbers that reveal percentages of participation since the eruption of the January 2011 revolution shows that there is a proportional relationship between the turnout on one hand and the role the elections would play in the democratization process and actual competition between different factions on the other hand. People were looking for the opposite of what happened throughout the Mubarak era when the results of the elections were predetermined in favor of the NDP. The same scenario happened in the last elections since the

results of the parliamentary elections were also predetermined in favor of the lists supported by the state and the president.

Return of the old days:

The turnout in the last parliamentary elections was estimated at 25.56% in the first round¹ and 21.71% in the second round² and the turnout in the entire election in the first and second rounds was estimated at 25%. This demonstrates the abstention of a large segment of the population, especially compared to the 2012 elections where the turnout exceeded 60%. In fact, abstention from voting played a major role in the results of the 2015 elections. The main difference between the elections of 2010 and those of 2015 is that in the first there was direct rigging through actually filling in hundreds of thousands of voting sheets while in the second almost nothing of that sort happened and all violations took place outside the polling stations.

The passive neutrality of the authorities remains a real problem. The authorities are expected to adopt a stance of positive neutrality in the elections, which means they do not side with specific candidates against others like what happened with the NDP. The word “positive” means that the authorities should only interfere to apply the law and stop any violations regardless of the candidates’ political affiliations. As for negative neutrality, it means that the state turns a blind eye to all the violations that take place during the electoral process whether in the media or outside the polling stations. In the last elections, the state was negatively neutral.

Like what happened in the Mubarak era, money played a major role in the 2015 elections. This was demonstrated in the strong influence of businessmen, who supported several parties such as the Nation’s Future Party, Free Egyptians Party, and the Conservative Party. Those elections also witnessed the return of several members of the formerly ruling National Democratic Party, many of whom won seats in the parliament. Many parties and electoral lists welcomed former NDP members who, they argued, were not guilty of administrative or financial corruption. Tribalism was also an important factor in the election results. The return of NDP members was largely through a number of parties established by its former members and/or supporters such as the Conservative Party, the Freedom Party, the Egyptian National Party, the Modern Egypt Party, and the National Movement Party. The Free Egyptians Party was established after the January 2011 revolution and several revolutionary youths and liberal figures joined it, yet the majority of its members who won seats in the last elections are former NDP members. The party won 65 seats. The total number of seats won by parties made up of former NDP members is 32 seats. When added to the seats won by the Free Egyptians Party, the percentage of seats those parties got would amount to 24% out of 488 seats.

Several independent candidates who are categorized as revolutionary ran in the 2015 elections such as Haitham al-Hariri, Ahmed Eid, Ahmed Fathi, Ahmed Tantawi, and Mohamed al-Sharkawi in addition to Amr al-Shobki. They all won with the exception of Ahmed Eid who

¹ “The Higher Committee for Elections Announces the Result of the First Round [Arabic]”: <http://is.gd/egEmcO>

² <http://is.gd/Vreaxc>

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lost with a difference of 200 votes in one of the Giza governorate constituencies. This trend is represented by around 25 MPs who are categorized as belonging to the center-left.

The Egyptian parliament is made up of parties and factions that are mostly supported by the state and independent candidates as follows:

Independent candidates: 300

The Free Egyptians Party: 65

For the Love of Egypt list: 120

The Nation's Future Party: 50

Al-Wafd Party: 45

Guardians of the Nation Party: 17

The People's Republican Party: 13

The Egyptian Social Democratic Party: 4

The National Movement Party: 4

The Peace Democratic Party: 5

The Freedom Party: 4

Misr Balady Party: 3

The Modern Egypt Party: 4

Al-Tagamou Party: 1

Reformations and Development Party: 1

Al-Riyada Party: 1

Guardians of the Revolution Party: 1³

Media and social networking websites battles:

The media was party to the last election in a direct manner and social networking websites turned into battlefields. The effects of those battles were different from one segment of the Egyptian society to another. Videos posted about specific candidates constituted an integral part of those battles, especially in the Dokki and Agouza constituency. For example, a TV channel broadcast a video of independent candidate Amr al-Shobki giving a lecture at the Middle East Institute in Washington D.C. In this lecture talks about the reasons that drove the military to interfere on July 3, 2013 and stresses that there was no alternative with the Muslim

³ “The Dominance of Independents, Female MPs with no Influence, Islamists without Power: The Most Prominent Features of the Parliament [Arabic]”: <http://www.aswatmasriya.com/news/details/21980>

Brotherhood rejecting all political settlements such as replacing the Muslim Brotherhood government with a government of experts, replacing the attorney general whose appointment was unconstitutional, and holding early presidential elections. In this lecture, Shobki accused the Muslim Brotherhood of being the main reason for the army's interference in the political scene and the subsequent obstruction of the democratic process. Several parts of the lecture were taken out and some parts replaced others so that Shobki would appear to be calling the June 30 protests as a coup d'état, thus adopting the same stance as the Muslim Brotherhood. In the midst of the hysteria that accompanied the battle between supporters and detractors of June 30, Amr al-Shobki was labeled a Muslim Brotherhood supporter despite the fact that in the 2012 election he won against Amr Darrag, one of the Brotherhood's senior leaders. Social networking websites started posting the video on a large scale and it did influence a large segment of the upper-middle class, most of whose members supported the post-June 30 regime and considered any opposition to it a form of treason. The video did not have the same effect in working class neighborhoods in the same constituency such as Ard al-Lewaa, Mit Oqba, and Old Dokki as was observed by members of Shobki's campaign after the first round. In the second round, more votes went to Shobki despite a decline in the number of voters to almost half.

Another video that featured in this battle was one of Shobki's rival attacking candidates with foul language. Shobki's campaign members was rumored to have posted this video and they responded by saying that the public has the right to see the video as long as it is not fabricated and nothing in it is taken out of context. This video put a large number of voters from the middle and upper classes off Shobki's rival, yet many of those voted for him in the second round. The influence of this video was minimal in working class neighborhoods.

This constituency is categorized as an upper and middle one together with a few other constituencies in Cairo and Alexandria. It was also one of the constituencies that received a great deal of media attention.

The discrepancy in the influence of the two videos on different social classes is quite indicative as far as voter behavior is concerned. The first video is a lecture in Washington that had an impact on people who are supposed to have a good knowledge of English and can, therefore, watch the whole video and know what it really is about. However, most of those did not play the video to start with and only followed the campaign launched against Shobki. This was not the case with Shobki's rival whose video was actually watched and played an important part in their decision not to vote for him. None of the videos, on the other hand, had any influence on members of the working class who treated the whole matter with a great deal of neutrality.

Concluding remarks:

The experience of parliamentary elections had a substantial impact on the political scene in the post July 3 era and gave rise to discussions on the challenges the political process in Egypt is currently facing and the way the parliament's current structure is expected to shape it. In this context, the following issues need to be noted:

- 1- The turnout in the last parliamentary elections was the least in all elections that followed the January 2011 revolution, which means that the current parliament failed to attract large segments of voters. This is related to the elections law that made voters believe that the parliament will be too homogenous and will not be representative of different echelons of the Egyptian society.
- 2- It is obvious that the electoral process in the post-June 30 era was not based on a vision that aimed at including different political factions, which was still possible even after the exclusion of the Muslim Brotherhood following the group's failure in ruling the country and its involvement in a number of violent activities. In fact, no political factions took part in the competition and while the majority supported the new regime, opposition was confined to supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood. The result was a parliament in which independent candidates are un-politicized and civil factions, including those that supported the June 30 protests, are absent and in which the rest are members of pro-regime coalitions. The structure of the parliament demonstrates that political debates or disputes are bound to take place outside it and that any protests are likely to be led by political factions that are not represented in the parliament including those that supported the June 30 protests then were against the subsequent suppression of freedoms such as the protest law, the clampdown on civil society, and the absence of partisan participation.
- 3- In democratic countries, the media is regulated by a set of rules and this is entirely different from imposing restrictions on media outlets as is the case in Egypt. The draft law agreed upon by representatives of the Press Syndicate and independent media professionals and which was supposed to set such regulations never saw the light. And till now, the media in Egypt, especially TV, is not governed by any professional rules. In fact, none of the initiatives launched to regulate the media and protect its independence was implemented on the ground because they were not endorsed by the state. This gives the impression that the media is meant to remain a tool that the state can use in the way that serves its interests. That is why many media outlets get involved in battles between the state and the opposition and at times play a direct role in the incitement of hatred and intolerance.
- 4- One of the main reasons for abstention from the last parliamentary elections is the conviction on the part of a sizable portion of voters that the results were known beforehand and that the lists and candidates supported by the state were going to win, which is what actually happened.
- 5- It is important to note that the transformation witnessed by Egyptian elections after the January 2011 revolution mainly revolved around the elimination of direct rigging from inside polling stations, which is what used to happen during the Mubarak era and particularly in 2010 where judicial supervision was absent and the entire elections were rigged in favor of the NDP that got 98%. The January revolution erupted only a few months after. In the 2015 elections, the state did interfere to influence the voters whether through the media or security institutions or through the character

assassination of many undesirable candidates, but this interference never reached the extent of actually rigging the elections.

- 6- The 2015 elections can be considered a step towards the establishment of a non-pluralist system that does not embrace all political factions and ideologies, a system that is basically controlled by security institutions. Now, there isn't even any political mediator between the regime and political factions as was the case with the NDP, unwanted as it was. At that time, the NDP coordinated with security institutions and the presidency was home to a number of political advisors that were qualified to deal with several political figures and representatives of different political factions. At the moment, there is no ruling party and with the weak state of political parties, security institutions played the major and sole role in the elections and the previous formula in which security and politics were allied almost disappeared.
- 7- There is no doubt that a considerable number of Egyptians support the current regime and were in favor of the intervention of the military to oust the Muslim Brotherhood because they believed that it would establish a religious state that would eliminate for good all the traces of the Egyptian modern state. Such supporters have started to decrease as a result of the defective performance of the regime, the escalation of the economic crisis, and human rights violations.

It is important to be aware that the success of any of the Arab revolutions, such as in Tunisia despite the challenges, is mainly attributed to the society's ability to adapt to a conservative faction that was not drastically different from the pre-revolutionary regime in terms of the way it does not believe in revolutions. Tunisia also succeeded in setting legal and constitutional rules before starting the political competition, which is the opposite of what happened in Egypt when the Muslim Brotherhood came to power than wrote a constitution that suits their political and ideological agenda and was thus rejected by the rest of political factions. The success of Tunisian president Baji Qaid al-Sibsi in the last elections is an indication the Tunisia is on the right path despite the fact that he was part of Bourgiba's regime. The same applies to the absence in Tunisia of political exclusion laws and revolutionary courts, which when applied in Egypt created divisions and led to equating between traditional and conservative factions, which constitute the majority, with the corrupt symbols of Mubarak's regime.

The success of any democratic transition in the Arab world needs to be based on setting constitutional and legal rules before starting the political process that includes elections and competition between different factions. This transition will not be possible without acknowledging diversity. The conservative trend in Egypt is divided in two: one that supports the state and the ruling party and believes in the patriotic role of the army and another that adopts Islamist ideologies. The second faction's actions raised a lot of question marks about its desire to apply democracy or its belief in citizenship and the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt offers a good example. In fact, the participation of Islamists in politics as religious groups rather than political parties proved a failure. This also happened in

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Palestine and Iraq. Tunisia and Morocco, on the other hand, offer a different example since the religious group became independent from the political party.

The non-Islamist conservative trend in Egypt, which is still influential, rejects the January 25 revolution and is against the Muslim Brotherhood. The progressive trend, on the other hand, supports neither the Muslim Brotherhood nor the current regime. If laws that stipulate the inclusion of both trends in the political process and regulate the relationship between them are issued in Egypt, this might be the first step towards a real democratic transition. At the moment, this seems quite far-fetched.

