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The Struggle for the Reins of Government in Egypt

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The first round of parliamentary elections in Egypt was an unprecedented success in terms of its rate of participation. Millions of citizens crowded in long lines to exercise their civil right to vote freely for their representatives for the first time in their lives. Once the ballots were counted, the festive atmosphere gave way to a searching debate about the significance of the unprecedented achievements scored by the religious parties. Indeed, an intensive discussion is developing on the question of where Egypt is headed.

The parliamentary elections are being held according to a new and cumbersome procedure in which two-thirds of the seats in parliament are reserved for party representatives, while one-third is designated for independents. The Parliament will number 498 representatives; 10 more, to be appointed by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (henceforth “the military council”), will be added to this number. In the first round, 150 seats were up for election. The Freedom and Justice Party, representing the Muslim Brotherhood, received more votes than the polls had predicted, amounting to 73 representatives (49 percent of the contested seats). However, the real surprise was provided by the Salafist Nour Party, which took second place with 30 representatives (20 percent). Third place was taken by the Egyptian bloc, a coalition of liberal parties, which won 15 seats (10 percent); the Wafd, the veteran liberal party, won 11 seats (7 percent). The remaining seats were split among several parties. Everyone praised the revolution but very few of the elected representatives are identified with the young (most of whom have no party affiliation) who, ten months ago, breached the barrier of fear and led to the toppling of the Mubarak regime.

The common portrayal of the success of the Islamic parties in the parliamentary elections obscures the fact that this important political stream is not all cut from the same cloth. A

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comparative analysis of the positions of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist organizations indicates a radically different agenda on social and economic issues as well as on security and foreign affairs. While both camps view the implementation of Islamic religious law – *shari'a* – as a foundation for legislation, their respective legal and religious interpretations lead to very different positions. The desire of the Freedom and Justice Party to establish itself as a centrist political party was reflected in its platform and the many pragmatic statements issued by its leaders. The most significant challenge they now face is how to translate the party's historic slogan ("Islam is the solution") into practical steps of legislation and policy. They are now required to draft practical programs for repairing the desperate economic and financial situation, solving the problems of unemployment, and increasing public services. Despite their hostility toward Israel, the leaders understand that the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty is interwoven in the net of the country's security, economic, and political interests. By contrast, the leaders of the Salafist camp do not hide their intention of turning Egypt into a state that conducts itself on the basis of the most stringent interpretation of *shari'a*. Their avowed positions on religion and state, sovereignty and democracy suggest that they are in practice interested in turning Egypt into a theocracy.

What is the status of the elected parliament in the internal Egyptian power structure? After some six decades of parliamentary paralysis, the 2011-2012 elections are breathing life into the oldest house of representatives in the Middle East. The next rounds of parliamentary elections should conclude in approximately another month. The Freedom and Justice Party will seek to form a broad coalition and control the legislature's various committees. Already trying to give political meaning to the tremendous support it earned at the polls, party leaders are demanding that the parliament itself determine the composition of the committee to formulate the new constitution and that the coalition establish a government that will replace the recently appointed government headed by Kamal al-Ganzouri.

However, one of the most significant outcomes of the revolution is that no locus of power is in exclusive control of the state apparatus and the public sphere. In addition to the parliament, the military council, non-religious parties, and extra-parliamentary bodies (including the April 6 and Coalition of the Youth of the Revolutionary movements) are participants in the clash of titans over the shaping of the new order. In approximately six months, a new president, to be elected by free elections, will also enter the fray. Since the establishment of the republic (following the Free Officers Revolt of July 1952), the presidency has been the supreme locus of power in the country. The election of a president may yet again upset the applecart in the struggle for the reins of control of the state.

Since the ouster of Mubarak, the military council has maintained the authority to run the affairs of state. By virtue of its decisions, the constitution was suspended, the parliament dissolved, and dozens of edicts and decrees issued. In practice, the military council has functioned as both the executive and the legislative branches. According to the outline determined by its leaders at the end of the parliamentary election campaign, a committee to formulate a new constitution will be convened, and by late June 2012 there will be presidential elections. In the interim, there will be a transition government, and the military council will continue to bear comprehensive responsibility for managing the affairs of state. Following the presidential elections, the authority will pass to the elected leadership in accordance with the new constitution. At that stage the army is supposed to exit the stage, but the common assumption is that its leaders will continue to play a central role in formulating Egyptian policy, particularly in the field of national security, which brings together a wide range of issues.

Opposition to the military council's continued hold on the reins of government is widespread. Large demonstrations demanding the transfer of power from military to civilian hands have been held in recent months. Movements identified with the young (April 6 and the Coalition of the Youth of the Revolution) have assertively demanded the establishment of a "national salvation government" to conduct the affairs of state during the transition period and have repeatedly described Field Marshall Tantawi and his cohorts as responsible for blocking the positive dynamics of the revolution. On the other hand, many in Egypt credit the military council for the relatively proper manner in which the parliamentary elections were held, and since the election process began there has been a significant increase in public support for the military council's actions.

The new constitution is supposed to define the nature of the Egyptian state and society (including issues of religion and state) and shape the structure of governance, especially the division of authority between the executive and legislative branches. As a result of the outcome of the first round of parliamentary elections, the military council has accelerated the pace of its initiative to convene an advisory council, comprising notable public figures, including some of the leading presidential candidates. These two forums will at some point determine what to do at the later stage of the transition period, and in particular determine the steps for establishing the constitutional committee and approving its proposals. The Muslim Brotherhood sees the establishment of the new forum as a move intended to keep it, as the largest party in parliament, from electing the committee to formulate the new constitution. Essential differences of opinion between the leading political party and the military council and other political forces are an inseparable part of the power struggle typical of the transition period.

The January 2011 revolution took place under two main banners. The first (“the people want to bring down the president”) was achieved within 18 days and nights of an impressive civil uprising. The second (“the people want to topple the regime”) is much harder to achieve. The struggle to shape the post-Mubarak order is at its height. The parliamentary elections are an important link in the chain of establishing the new order but are by no means the sum total. They can certainly not be seen as the final chord in the power struggle in the inter-Egyptian arena. The achievements of the Muslim Brotherhood in the first round of the elections are indicative of the dramatic change taking place in Egypt, but they are not evidence that Egypt is about to turn into a radical Islamic republic that would fundamentally change its foreign affairs and security policy. The claim that the Arab spring has become an Islamic winter is precisely what it sounds like: a simplistic trope that ignores the complexity of the revolution now underway in Egypt.

