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The “Revolutionary Parliament” and the New Governmental Order in Egypt

Yoram Meital

On the eve of the first anniversary of Egypt’s January 25 revolution, the country’s first parliament in the post-Mubarak era convened its opening session. The disputes among the freshly minted representatives as to how the session should be conducted, the choice of a speaker, and the oath of allegiance testified to the dramatic change underway in Egypt. For the first time in dozens of years, representatives elected in free and fair elections occupy the seats in parliament. Dr. Saad al-Katatni, a senior Muslim Brotherhood official, was chosen as speaker of the parliament.

After drawn out and procedurally complicated elections, 498 representatives were elected to the parliament of 2012. They were joined by ten representatives, including three women and five Copts appointed by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which manages affairs of state during the interim period. The Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), which ran on behalf of the Muslim Brotherhood, earned 216 seats: overnight the movement that for decades symbolized opposition to the regime became Egypt’s largest party. The Salafist al-Nour (“Light”) Party provided the biggest surprise, in sending 109 delegates to the parliament. The Liberal Party (al-Wafd) holds 41 seats, and the Egyptian Bloc, which represents left wing parties and is identified with the “secular” camp, is represented by 34 delegates. The remaining seats in the parliament are divided between approximately a dozen parties and independent delegates.

The current parliament faithfully reflects the new political balance of power in Egypt, and compared to previous parliaments, it more fully represents the society. However, the “revolutionary parliament,” as it is called in Egypt, has only twelve women. Moreover, it does not include significant representation of the youth who ignited and led the civil

Prof. Yoram Meital is Chairman of the Chaim Herzog Center for Middle East Studies and Diplomacy at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

uprising and who, since the fall of the Mubarak regime, have campaigned for the immediate transfer of power and authority from the military to the parliament. During the opening session, many delegates praised the contribution of the “youths of the revolution” – at the same time that these activists were demonstrating in Tahrir Square. A letter sent by the April 6 Movement to the elected representatives stated: “The people chose you to represent them in the parliament, and therefore it is incumbent upon you to fulfill their demands and the demands of the revolution.” The delegates were called upon to demand that the Military Council immediately transfer their state management powers to the parliament until a civilian president is elected. Other groups are demanding that the parliament reexamine the laws published by the Military Council and immediately establish a commission of inquiry to examine the army’s responsibility for the death of protesters. Clearly, forces in civil society have marked the revolutionary parliament as the main institutional address for their demands. In Tahrir Square, some place responsibility for the failure to achieve the revolution’s goals not only on the Military Council, but also on the parties, and in particular, the Freedom and Justice Party.

The public discussion of the Muslim Brotherhood and the government, underway in Egypt for some eighty years, accelerated in the wake of the Brotherhood’s unprecedented gains in the parliamentary elections of 2005. In the first round of these elections, the Brotherhood won 88 seats, but the regime subsequently disrupted the elections process and prevented the Brotherhood from achieving much larger gains. The government’s tough policy toward the movement saw the arrest of dozens of senior officials who were tried in military courts and severely punished. In the public sphere, both supporters of the regime and many liberals waged a campaign to blacken the name of the Muslim Brotherhood. In turn, the latter sought to fend off criticism by means of parliamentary activity that seldom dealt with religious issues and by issuing declarations and documents that presented pragmatic positions on civilian, economic, and political topics. Dr. Mohammad al-Sayed Habib, deputy general guide of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, published a fascinating article, “What if the Brothers Come to Power?” Early on he stressed “that the Brotherhood’s coming to power is not realistic, at least in the near future. However, if it does happen, how would we view such a government?” First, the movement will support establishment of a government based on free elections. The elected parliament will promote “a new constitution that defines the governmental order (democratic parliamentary republic) and the relations between governmental authorities and the people, including limitation of the president’s term and his authorities.” The first topic the government will address is “permitting general freedoms.” Economic policy will be based on principles of a market economy, but will support weak sectors in society. At the top of the list of national priorities will be the battle against poverty and

unemployment, unchecked inflation, and a solution to problems of housing, transportation, and health. The education system is a priority when resources are allocated.

Today the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood is called on not only to update its positions on these and many other issues, but most of all to realize in deed the organization’s historic slogan, “Islam is the solution.” The FJP is required to launch practical programs to cope with a variety of urgent problems, mainly restoring law and order, rehabilitating the economy, and waging a comprehensive war against the corruption that is rampant in both the public and private sectors. As a reform movement based on pragmatic religious interpretation, the Muslim Brotherhood advocates conducting affairs of state in cooperation with the existing bureaucracy and security establishment. The group’s leaders declare that their policy will be based on the religious principle of ensuring the public good, which will guarantee the rights of all Egyptian citizens and a policy that takes into account all national interests.

In this context, the FJP seeks to form a parliamentary coalition based on “national consent,” and not necessarily religious consent. This is not a simple task. FJP leaders are seeking to include in this coalition as many representatives as possible from the liberals and the youth, but the gaps in positions are quite wide. Many in the liberal Wafd Party, for example, claim that differences of opinion on the issue of religion and state should not be swept under the rug, and that it is better to lead the opposition in parliament and expose their Islamist rivals’ inability to govern. Other delegates believe that joining a coalition will aid them in promoting goals they will have difficulty in achieving from the opposition.

Elections to the revolutionary parliament have also opened a new chapter in relations between the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist groups. While all advocate implementing Islamic law in every area of life, they have different religious interpretations regarding the means to advance this goal. Until recently, the Salafists objected to political participation and their public activity was rather limited. Their entry into the arena of political parties indicates a dramatic change in approach, which is no less significant than their achievements at the polls. This change reshuffles the cards in the Egyptian political arena, particularly in relations between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists. In the wake of their impressive achievement in the parliamentary elections, the Salafists will seek to expand their public activity and compete against the Muslim Brotherhood for the conservative religious vote. In this context, efforts by the Freedom and Justice Party to form a coalition without the al-Nour Party are noteworthy. At the same time, these political moves will not prevent ad hoc cooperation on parliamentary issues between the two Islamist parties that constitute some 70 percent of the parliament.

The revolutionary parliament is a critical link in the attempt to institutionalize a new post-Mubarak governmental order. The coming months will see other critical links: ratification of a new constitution, election of the president of the republic, transfer of all governmental powers to an elected civilian leadership, dissolution of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, and the army's return to its camps. Completion of this process will lead to creation of a new governmental and political order whose orientation will be determined only in the course of a fierce struggle among the forces mentioned above. Thus while it is still too early to assess what form the "new" order will assume, it will likely be characterized by long term power struggles. Egypt is in the midst of a revolutionary experience, and its long history indicates that the dramatic changes will affect processes throughout the Middle East.

