Post-Elections Assessment: The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt's Parliament

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The elections for the People's Assembly in Egypt were held in three stages, between November 9 and December 9, 2005. The extent of the electoral blow sustained by the ruling National Democratic Party began to emerge already with the initial voting. By the end of the first round the Muslim Brotherhood had doubled its representation over the outgoing Assembly, where only seventeen "independent" delegates were identified with the movement. At this point the regime understood the need to halt the progress of the opposition and for this purpose tapped well-tried methods: mass arrests (more than 1600) of Brotherhood activists; security forces to restrict access to the voting booths; armed thugs to attack the Brotherhood members; and a campaign of slander and intimidation in the state-controlled media.

By the time the elections were over and the ruling party had exhausted its capabilities of repatriating its erstwhile members, it had earned 311 seats out of 444, a majority of 72 percent.[1] The lists of candidates and elected representatives, however, indicate that the National Party itself received only 30 percent of the seats, while the rest of the representatives were people who had left the party but had been hurriedly restored to their political origin.

Facing the predictable – if somewhat problematic – majority of the National Party is a rising opposi-

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tion bloc. Although it is forbidden in Egypt to establish parties on the basis of religious platform, the 2005 elections positioned the Brotherhood as the second largest political bloc and as the sole parliamentary opposition to the Mubarak regime. Of the 150 ostensibly independent candidates of the Brotherhood, eighty-eight were elected to the People's Assembly, despite the unfair treatment they had endured. Now constituting one fifth of all the elected representatives, their representation has increased five-fold relative to the outgoing Assembly.

The ensuing reality, a function of the interface between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Mubarak re-

gime, was created by many factors. These include the weakness of party politics in the wake of the regime's tendency in past years to prevent new forces from imbuing the state with a civilian character (personalities such as Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim, the head of the Ibn Khaldoun Center; or Ayman Nour, the founder of the al-Ghad party and its first chairman); the organized obstacles to the formation of secular liberal parties (even though in Egypt no political group is secular in the Western meaning of the term); and the failure of the traditional opposition to challenge the authoritarian regime. Legally recognized opposition parties received only nine seats in the incoming As-

People's Assembly Building, Cairo

sembly, and thirteen additional opposition parties did not receive a single mandate.

Most of all, the 2005 elections signal the end of the secular (as it were) parliamentary opposition. The elections for the People's Assembly exposed all the problems of the Egyptian opposition: the absence of strong party leaderships, the fragility of the organizational structures, and the lack of innovative ideas. All these factors prevented them from presenting a viable alternative to the National Party.

Da'awa over Jihad as a Rise to Power

In contrast to the traditional parliamentary opposition, the Muslim Brotherhood had at its disposal extensive financial resources, composed of contributions from loyal supporters of means, *zakat* payments in the movement's mosques, and, quite possibly, money from external sources. It also boasted an organizational infrastructure numbering 25,000 volunteers who recruited voters using a computerized database and public opinion polls. The elections were preceded by long months of preparation, which assessed correctly the feelings of public disgust with the Mubarak regime and the pressure applied by the US and European countries for a greater degree of openness in the political system, including demands for tolerance towards signs of opposition.

The month of Ramadan, which ended in early November on the eve of the elections, provided the Brotherhood with the opportunity for conducting election propaganda under the mantle of the month's closing celebration and for sharpening its image as the "defenders of Islam" who stand opposed to the "secular" regime. The Brotherhood's candidates were not required to conceal their organizational affiliations, and they resorted without hesitation to the movement's slogan, "Islam is the solution." The orchestrated offensive waged by the regime in the state-controlled media played into the hands of the Brotherhood, since it underlined the contrast with the Mubarak regime. Indeed, although Egypt is culturally religious

in nature, it is doubtful whether all the voters who placed the names of "independent" candidates associated with the Brotherhood in the ballot boxes truly aspire to the establishment of a religious state. The majority of them simply voted against the regime of the National Party.

The current success of the Muslim Brotherhood, established in 1928 and outlawed in Egypt since 1954, proved to the movement's leaders that they were right, thirty years ago, to choose the protracted path of *da'awa* (preaching and emotionally converting), while veiling the ultimate vision of transforming Egypt into a theocracy. In the 1970s, when President Sadat initiated the reestablishment of the parties and permitted their newspapers, he allowed the Brotherhood to publish two journals (*al-Da'awa* and *al-I'tisam*), but left them outside the law and extended the prohibition of their organizing as a party. At that time there were numerous Islamic *Gama'at* in Egypt who aspired to overthrow Sadat because he was regarded as a modern pharaoh. For tactical reasons, the Brotherhood desisted from publicly criticizing the regime for heresy and the society for being *jahili* (a term derived from the period of "ignorance" before the rise of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula). It suspended the armed struggle (jihad) and the drive to overthrow the current despotic leader (*ta'aghut*) as a means of implementing its philosophy, and concentrated on welfare activities and preaching.

However, the movement never abandoned its slogan "Islam is the solution" or in other words, the aspiration to enforce its understanding of the sole, absolute truth, according to which Islam is a source of life and the movement is the single authority qualified to interpret and implement it. In its own way, while exploiting the weakening grip of the regime because of the pressure for democratization, the Brotherhood achieved public legitimacy, inclusion in the political arena, and integration in the es-

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tablishment in one of the authorities of the Egyptian regime, without being shackled by the parties law or the non-government organizations law.

In the 2005 elections the movement did not risk supplanting the minimum majority required by the National Party in the People's Assembly (66 percent of all the seats) in order to pass laws the regime wishes to enact even in the face of opposition and reservations. The Muslim Broth-erhood professed to present a working program for reform in the spirit of the amendments demanded by liberal opposition factions. The "reform debate" and the Brotherhood's words of pacifism were intended to appease the United States and Europe in order to maintain the momentum of external pressure on the Egyptian regime to continue the process of political reform, which would permit further strengthening of the movement.

The Muslim Brotherhood as a Catalyst for Change

Egyptian and foreign observers expect positive results from the strengthening of the Brotherhood in the People's Assembly. In their view the Brotherhood is likely to act as an agent of change in the Assembly, since its empowerment indicates the failed policy adopted by Arab regimes, Egypt included, of sowing fear among the citizens. In the opinion of these observers, the Brotherhood's entry into political action is likely to change its self-image from a besieged and threatened group (*gama'a*), whose task is to criticize and pressure, to a group obligated to present to the citizens a practical alternative. It cannot escape behind the mantra "Islam is the solution," a slogan permitting it to evade confronting the problems of the individual, society, and the economy. Observers who are less inclined to undermine the current regime contend that the Brotherhood will be able to use its representation in the People's Assembly in order to upgrade the

da'awa into political activities, while ascending another rung in the ladder of gradual progress towards the strategic aim of converting Egypt

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into an Islamic religious state.

On the other hand, the polarity created on the Egyptian political scene may well confirm to the regime that its path is correct. The Brotherhood's achievements are likely to be used by the Mubarak regime as overwhelming proof of the nature of Middle East democracy, if it proceeds in accordance with the demands of Western countries. Last year the Mubarak regime demonstrated significant courage by undertaking political risks – however limited – whose success was not a foregone conclusion. It is doubtful whether the regime is ready to sacrifice its stability just to prove to those playing with the idea of the inclusion of Islamic organizations in the political framework of Arab countries that it followed the correct path.

The Egyptian regime is careful not to display panic and is avoiding hurriedly quelling the first signs of change portended by the current elections, and will certainly not behave like Algeria in 1991 and involve the country in a civil war. The Egyptian press – mainly of the opposition, but also establishment dailies such as *al-Ahram* and *al-Akhbar* – has included calls to the regime not to inflate the problem artificially beyond its true dimensions, since no threat is posed by the Brotherhood to the hegemony of Mubarak's regime or to that of the National Party in the People's Assembly.

Furthermore, it is doubtful whether the Egyptian regime will appreciate that its own behavior strangled the legal opposition by contesting it in the past and thereby destroying any basis for moderate popular support. Fahmi Huweidi, a prominent Egyptian publicist, argues that if the regime had carried out genuine stocktaking and drawn practical conclusions, it would have adopted a strategy of meeting the challenge of the Muslim Brotherhood with its own slogan, "The solution (to the fundamental problems) is the solution." In other words, treatment of the core problems to which the Brotherhood is offering a solution – rickety social service infrastructures; insufficient welfare organizations; troublesome, corrupt, and non-transparent bureaucracy; failure to honor civil rights; and the shakiness of the cornerstones of democracy, such as separation of the branches of the regime – would have persuaded the Egyptian citizen not to resort to solutions originating in dangerous ideas.

Another, more realistic possibility available to the regime is to allow the Brotherhood to be put to the test of political action. Brotherhood candidates have been presented to the voters as individuals free of corruption and political mistakes. From now on the stand of the Brotherhood representatives in the People's Assembly will be judged during every vote. It is unclear whether the eighty-eight representatives will succeed in adopting a discourse that captures their uniqueness as a political force and faithfully reflects their doctrine. Even more important, it remains to be seen if they will be able to preserve the dual language and positions so as to retain their ideological popularity while not being regarded as fanatics.

In light of the splits in the ranks of the Brotherhood, leading figures in the Egyptian regime believe that there is little risk in permitting the activities of the Brotherhood in the People's Assembly while exploiting the parliamentary rules for its own benefit. Concomitantly, the regime can maintain the rules outside the parliamentary arena that previously applied to the Brotherhood, such as the restrictions imposed by the Emergency Law, the prohibition of its activities, and arrests. Until disputes arise within the ranks and the Brotherhood reaches the point of a rift, the regime can achieve a cease-fire or make a deal with it. In the

meantime, as expressed by President Mubarak in the opening session of the People's Assembly on December 19, 2005, the regime can clarify its expectations for maximum cooperation on the Brotherhood's part in return for its de facto adoption as part of the Egyptian political reform. In any event, the Mubarak regime will apparently be obliged to divert increasing attention and resources to internal matters.

The Middle East has accumulated much experience in models of Islam-state relations – the Iranian or Sudanese model, the Algerian model, and the Moroccan or Turkish model. The Mubarak regime would prefer not to choose one of the existing models, but to create an Egyptian model in which the Muslim Brotherhood continues to be prohibited by law but tolerated as a parliamentary opposition bloc. In a model of this sort the existing political and social order is not threatened.

The five-year sentence imposed on December 24, 2005 on former al-Ghad leader Ayman Nour, and the sentences of between five and ten years imposed on six of his colleagues, raises the suspicion that the Mubarak regime, caught between American pressure to introduce reforms and the threat of Egyptian public unrest, gave first priority to strangling the liberal opposition, one of whose recent outstanding symbols was Nour himself. If so, the transformation of the Muslim Brotherhood into the principal and sole opposition to the Mubarak regime

is, in the latter's view, a small price to pay for avoiding the possibility of a real opposition, particularly when the regime has experience in how to treat the Brotherhood by means of repressive and restrictive measures. The possibility cannot be ruled out that the regime hopes that in the course of time the Brotherhood will lose its popularity among the broad Egyptian public, which despite its religious affinities is uneasy about the imposition of Islamic law. In such circumstances this public will once again look to the Mubarak regime, if only as the default option of preserving the status quo.

The US and the Democratization Experiment

Voices can be heard in Washington, both from research institutes and among professional officials, calling for the inclusion of the Muslim Brotherhood in the political game, in order both to temper the movement and to contribute to the advance of democratization, as part of the engagement with the political Islamic movements in the Middle East. The rationale behind these calls is that a policy of containment of Islamic elements such as the Muslim Brotherhood within the institutions of the regimes will separate them from radical organizations such as al-Qaeda and its affiliates, which call for implementation of jihad and perpetration of terrorist attacks, and will force them to adopt greater flexibility and moderation in both words and deeds. According to this overall view of the democra-

tization process, the risk of empowering the Brotherhood is regarded as almost negligible in the face of the chances to open the Egyptian political system.

The increased representation of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Egyptian People's Assembly may well make it easier for American representatives to persuade their voters and the US legislature to recognize the need to establish permanent channels of dialogue with members of the organization. A greater source of concern for the Egyptian regime, even though it is still far from reality, is that external bodies will not automatically reject the possibility of the Muslim Brotherhood forming an acceptable alternative to the regime. In the opinion of

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quite a few Egyptian publicists who do not belong to the ranks of avowed supporters of the US, this will cause Egypt to become a large experimental laboratory in which some of the American programs for democratization and change of the Middle East will be put to the test, in the wake

of their questionable success in Iraq where ethnic strife has soared.

The regime fears that it will be accused by the Bush administration of being the primary responsibility for destroying the potential breeding ground for the would-be democrati-

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zation. US demands for gradual political liberation would increase, which would extend the limits of political organization and freedom of speech and create a non-Islamic opposition. The Mubarak regime is well aware that if it plans its moves properly, it can use the Brotherhood as a foil to deter the Americans and simultaneously alleviate the pressure for more democratization, justifying the decelerated introduction of further reforms beyond those announced last year.

The Question of Israel

An opposition dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood will be quite vocal and insistent in its demand that the regime not surrender to what are regarded as dictates by Israel and the US and avoid any form of normalization. The Brotherhood's General Guide, Muhammad Mahadi A'kaf,

displayed forced pragmatism when he promised in November that the organization would honor the agreements that Egypt had signed with Israel. However, the Brotherhood did not retract its non-recognition of the State of Israel, the opposition to the peace agreements with it, and the call to boycott it. Already in the first week of the activities of the new People's Assembly it hurried to call on the Egyptian government to convene experts in the fields of economics, policy, and strategy, in order to reevaluate the Camp David agreements and reconsider their current value.

Also in December 2005 A'kaf gave free rein to his tongue and exposed the anti-Semitic nature of his movement when he revealed that the Brotherhood is awaiting the end of the Israeli "cancer" that nests in the heart of the Middle East. In a subsequent weekly column (December 22) on the Brotherhood's website, he called the Holocaust "a fable," and then justified himself by saying that he only wished to criticize the Western democracies that rush to attack anyone who raises doubts regarding the Holocaust and its dimensions, in contrast to the views of the Zionists. The Number 2 man in the organization, Muhammad Habib, came to the defense of the General Guide and explained that the stories about what happened in the Holocaust were "exaggerated" and that "documentation and proof" were required.

The Egyptian regime, which already regards the strengthening of relations with Israel and practical

coordination with it as a burden in terms of local propaganda, is likely to find itself subject to increasing determined opposition to any move or gesture towards Israel. At the same time, the opposition of the Brotherhood is liable to be employed by the Egyptian regime as a pretext for its refusal to expand cooperation with Israel, because of the need to consolidate its strength in the face of a stubborn opposition. It will continue to avoid advances to Israel beyond the minimum required to serve the Palestinian issue or the purely economic and security interests of Egypt.

Although Hamas has escaped from the grip of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, it is highly doubtful if the regime will take into account the Brotherhood opposition in its ongoing involvement in the Palestinian question. The regime regards the Brotherhood as an internal Egyptian problem, and the choice of how to deal with it is reserved for the regime only. In contrast, Hamas is regarded by decision-makers in Egypt who deal with the Palestinian question as an explosive issue that must be neutralized before it ruins Egypt's efforts to continue the "calm," implement the Sharm el-Sheikh understandings of February 8, 2005, and establish the proper running of the Palestinian Authority. However, the Egyptians are not publicly demanding that Hamas surrender its weapons. An exception to this may well be a constraint in the form of increased public unrest, headed by the Muslim Brotherhood, as occurred after Israel killed Sheikh Yassin in March 2004 and after the

assassination of his successor, Abdel Aziz Rantisi, the following month.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as a Regional Role Model

It is still too early to estimate whether the strengthening of the Muslim Brotherhood on the Egyptian political scene, despite the efforts of the regime, the preventative steps it took, and the offensive measures against the movement, will form a source of inspiration or a model for imitation for other Islamic organizations throughout the Middle East. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is a parent movement that spawned factions in Syria, Jordan, and the Palestinian territories. Recently, despite the difference in methods of election, the nature of the movements, and the way in which they chose to be run, Hamas, in advance of the Palestinian Legislative Council elections, as well as other Islamic elements, has drawn encouragement from the success of the Brotherhood in Egypt.

In any event, it is doubtful whether there is any basis for the warnings about an Islamic flood, issued by some commentators after the Iranian Revolution in 1979. In subsequent years there were outbreaks of Islamic protest, mainly Shi'ite, but the apocalyptic vision of the export of the Islamic revolution was not realized. The Sunni Islamic state established in Sudan did not extricate the country from its status as a failed state,

and even worsened it. The current Egyptian case is experimental in that it raises the question of whether it is preferable to permit the active political participation of Islamists, though limited and controlled, in order to monitor and moderate their activities, as an alternative to their employing violence (as happened in Iraq) and on condition that their organizations are forced to surrender their weapons

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Whatever the outcome, it is impossible to ignore the reality created in Egypt, where in the absence of a political alternative other than the Islamists, democratization inevitably means the strengthening of Islamic elements that are not democratic and for whom democracy is merely a

conduit for gaining a foothold in the regime so they can eliminate it when they feel confident of their power. Will this model gain momentum? Results of other election campaigns, such as for the permanent parliament in Iraq and the Palestinian Legislative Council, will provide additional clues. Recurring support for Islamic elements among the voters may help to convince regimes throughout the Middle East that wish to maintain internal stability in the face of external pressures that it is possible that Islamic political participation is not necessarily the worst-case scenario, and is perhaps a small price to pay for neutralizing the pressure for more far-reaching political reforms and for achieving internal stability.

However, in the long term, unless the Arab states address the fundamental problems concerning their citizens, set up competitive rules between "real" parties that are not merely puppets in their hands, or adopt a secular constitution (as was done by Turkey in the 1920s) – which is virtually impossible in the light of the strengthening of social Islamization of those same countries – permitted, active involvement by Islamic elements in the political arena will be a stepping stone towards further Islamization of the political and social systems.

Notes

1   The president is entitled to appoint ten additional representatives to the People's Assembly, so there is a total of 454 members.