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Egypt's Upcoming Parliamentary Elections

Weakened Parliament, Weakened Parties

Nadine Sika

According to the roadmap for political transformation announced in July 2013, Egypt's parliamentary elections should have taken place six months after the constitutional amendments. Yet, since then, they have been postponed several times. They are now scheduled for March and April 2015. Until recently, the regime has been reluctant to hold parliamentary elections, fearing an unruly parliament not dominated by a regime party, as in the past. In June and December 2014, the government enacted a new electoral law and an electoral district law, which will reduce the chances of political parties in general – and political opposition parties in particular – from gaining a substantive number of seats in parliament. By deliberately impeding political parties from playing an important role in parliament, the regime is just adding to its own volatility. Therefore, priority should be given to pushing for the inclusion of all political forces in the electoral process and the strengthening of political parties.

After the ouster of Mohamed Morsi from power in July 2013, the then Minister of Defense, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, announced a roadmap for political transformation. Three major milestones were sought to enhance the legitimacy of the new regime: the rewriting of the 2012 constitution, followed by a national referendum; parliamentary elections; and presidential elections. In September 2013 interim president Adly Mansur appointed a constitutional committee of 50 individuals, which was charged with revising a constitutional draft proposal of a 10-member committee that had also been appointed by Mansur. The committee of 50 was composed of members from different syndicates, unions, official religious institutions and public figures. Political parties were granted six seats; the Islamist political current was granted two (one for the Salafi al-Nour Party and one for an Islamist thinker who was a previous member of the Muslim Brotherhood). The constitutional referendum took place in January 2014. A few days later, Mansur announced a "slight" change in the roadmap, with presidential elections to precede parliamentary elections. Presidential elections were held in May 2014, leading to a clear-cut victory for al-Sisi. Parliamentary elections are now scheduled to begin on 21 March 2015. Yet, the meddling with parliamentary elections provides the observer with mixed messages concerning today's

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politics in Egypt. Why is the regime not enthusiastic about parliamentary elections? Is it due to the irrelevance of these elections or the government's reluctance in dealing with a parliament that might be host to its political opposition?

The Legal Framework

Both the 2012 and the 2014 constitutions mirror the uncontested dominance of the military in Egyptian politics. The 2014 constitution reinforces the 1971 constitutional arrangement of a strong executive and a weak parliament. The parliament does not have oversight of the military budget, nor does it have power over the decision to go to war. The main competencies granted to parliament in the constitution concern the right to approve general economic and social policies, the national budget (barring the military budget) and de jure oversight of the executive branch. The president has the right to dissolve parliament (Article 137) after acquiring approval through a referendum. The president has the right to appoint the prime minister with the agreement of a simple majority in parliament. In case there is no such vote of confidence, the article gives the president the right to dissolve parliament without a referendum.

The impediments to a strong parliament are not only found in the constitution, but lie also in the 2014 parliamentary election law. This law proposes a mixed electoral system that has both a candidate list and single member district representation. The system allows 420 parliamentary seats for single member candidates and 120 seats for closed list candidates. The remaining 27 seats of the 567-seat legislature shall be appointed by the president. Both the candidate list and the individual candidates are elected through a winner-takes-all system. In addition, the 2014 electoral district law divides the country into 232 districts, for individual candidacies, and 4 districts with electoral lists, where the winning list takes all allocated seats.

The effects of these two laws will further weaken the already weak political parties for two main reasons. First, the low number of seats chosen through electoral lists provides political parties the chance for competition beyond just the 120 parliamentary seats. On the other hand, the 420 seats allocated to single member districts are more likely to be won by well-connected individuals or businessmen who can provide their constituents with goods and perks in order to win their district seats. Second, it was customary that independent candidates who won parliamentary elections became co-opted into the National Democratic Party (NDP). Thus, political conflicts or rivalries between different individuals were resolved under the party umbrella. Yet, today, with no dominant party and a weak party system, individual candidates will most likely remain independent without party affiliations, further fragmenting parliament along individual interests.

Earlier Parliaments

Although the results of parliamentary elections under Husni Mubarak were always known to be in favor of the then-ruling NDP, elections and parliament also served as important conduits for the contestation, cooptation and legitimation of the political order. The presence of opposition forces in the political process in general – and in parliament in particular – gave Mubarak the internal and international legitimacy needed to assert his rule.

Though he ensured the presence of opposition in various parliaments, Mubarak weakened the opposition by ensuring that they would not gain more than 10 percent of parliamentary seats. In 1984 and 1987, when political parties that were aligned with the Brotherhood won almost 30 percent of seats, these parliaments were dissolved by the Supreme Constitutional Court on account of being "unconstitutional."

The 2010 parliamentary elections were mired in electoral fraud, which led to an unprecedented exclusion of the opposition

from parliament. Of the 508-seat parliament, the opposition – both secular parties and the Brotherhood combined – won only 15 seats. As a consequence, when political activists mobilized for an end to the Mubarak regime in January 2011, opposition parties quickly joined in.

After the ouster of Mubarak from office, an electoral law with mixed proportional representation and single member districts was enacted. The results of the first post-Mubarak parliamentary elections in November 2011 and January 2012 showed a marked weakness of the secular forces vis-à-vis the Islamists. The two major Islamist blocs, led by the Brotherhood and the Salafists together, won a majority of more than 70 percent of parliamentary seats. However, on the basis of earlier precedents, the Supreme Constitutional Court dissolved this parliament as well in the summer of 2012.

Electoral Coalitions

The leadership's reluctance to hold parliamentary elections can be traced to the lack of one dominant political party. Unlike his predecessors, President al-Sisi does not have a party that can work as a political machine to guarantee him support for presidential policies in parliament.

Some attempts have been made by public figures, such as Amr Moussa, former Secretary-General of the League of Arab States and former presidential contestant, to build one large coalition to counteract the Salafi and Brotherhood's dominance of the 2012 parliament. Such a coalition has not materialized, however. Rather, rivalries and disputes had led to three main secular coalitions by December 2014. In January 2015, one of these coalitions split up: the Egyptian Front Coalition, which was composed of some staunch supporters of the military, such as the Congress Party, led by former presidential candidate Amr Moussa. The backbone of the coalition – the Congress Party, the Unionist Progressive Party and the Tomorrow Party – were the major parties to leave.

The Egyptian Wafd Coalition, which mainly consists of the Wafd and the Egyptian Social Democratic Party, is still holding together. Also, the Civic Democratic Current remains intact, which consists of new political parties established after the Mubarak regime, such as the Constitution Party, founded in 2010 by Mohamed El Baradei, the former Director-General of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

In December 2014 Abdel Gelil Mustafa, the former coordinator of the National Association for Change – an association established by El Baradei – attempted to unite these coalitions to put together joint candidate lists for the proportional representation districts. These lists have strong support from the Egyptian Front and its splinter parties in addition to the Civic Democratic Current. However, the extent to which this support would hold is still unclear. These shifting and fragmenting alliances are a reflection of the secular political parties' weakness. So far, they have shown themselves to be incapable of building a coalition for the four candidate lists, which would make up only a third of the upcoming parliament anyhow.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Islamists are also fragmented between the Brotherhood, the Salafis, the Gamaa Islamiyya and the Islamist political parties of Misr al-Qawiya and al-Wasat. Against the background of the imprisonment of all high-ranking Brotherhood officials, the banning of their party and the crackdown on their rank-and-file members, these parties have very few options for mobilizing votes for elections. Moreover, the Brotherhood is itself divided, with some supporting participation in parliamentary elections "under cover" and others in favor of a boycott. In addition, the government has been restricting the Salafis' presence in mosques, which were important venues for mobilization during the 2011/2012 parliamentary elections.

Outcomes of the 2015 Elections

The likely outcome of the upcoming elections is a parliament dominated by fractured secular parties and individuals and businessmen, with a minority of religious parties, mainly the Salafi al-Nour Party. The political parties represented in the secular political camp are likely to include members of the Egyptian Front Coalition and its splinter groups, the Wafd Coalition and the Free Egyptians Party, which was one of the new parties established after the ouster of Mubarak and is funded by business tycoon Naguib Sawiris. Together, these parties would function as al-Sisi's mouthpiece in parliament. The January 2015 meeting of President al-Sisi with the presidents of these parties is a clear indication of his preference for such a balance in parliament. It is also remarkable that the only Islamist parties invited to the meeting were al-Nour and Misr al-Qawiya. The latter, however, did not participate.

The opposition parties would consist of the Civic Democratic Current, representatives of which were also invited to the meeting by the president but were not able to attend. In any case, this coalition's presentation will likely be very weak. In the 2011/2012 parliamentary elections, a similar coalition, called "the Revolution Continues," was not able to receive more than 3 percent of seats.

The religious camp will be divided along the Salafi al-Nour Party, the Gamaa Islamiyaa's al Binaa wa-l-Tanmeya Party, and the moderate Misr al-Qawiya and al-Wasat parties. Even if the Brotherhood were to not opt for a boycott, with the current government's crackdown on it and the freezing of its leaders' financial assets, it would not have the means to mobilize votes.

Given all these splits and internal disputes among the secular parties preferred by al-Sisi, the Islamists' fragmentation and weakness, and the weakness of the Civic Democratic Current, the upcoming parliament is likely to be very weak. This will further increase the power of the executive branch, even more than the constitution and the legal framework have provided for.

Parliament and Instability

The weaknesses that are bestowed upon the legislature and on political parties through the constitution and laws, in addition to the political parties' own internal struggles, will be detrimental to the development of a strong parliament. Yet, a strong parliament is an important pillar for any participatory and democratic system, even in terms of authoritarian stabilization, and allows for the inclusion of a wide range of political forces that could voice opinions within the formal institutional structures. Last but not least, having a strong legislative body could potentially enhance good governance, through effective oversight of the government. State stability and good governance are the basis for economic development, which Egypt is in dire need of. Effective political parties are also essential for enhancing stability, as they could channel popular demands into the political sphere. In contrast, weak political parties are likely to result in more protest and tumult on the streets.

Germany and its European partners should reassert their commitment to a more stable Egypt. This can be done by pressing for the inclusion of all political currents in free and fair parliamentary elections and through assistance to all political parties via joint programs between European and Egyptian political parties. Political dialogues should be held by European political parties and their Egyptian counterparts to exchange political knowledge and skills in internal democracy and coalition-building processes.

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