

Viewpoints
No. 55

Egypt: The Closing of the Political Space

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The election of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to the presidency brings Egypt one step closer to the full implementation of the transitional road map. The last step, the holding of parliamentary elections, is also on schedule. Yet Egypt is not getting closer to democracy. The lopsided result of the presidential elections, with 96.91 of the votes going to al-Sisi, is not a sign of healthy pluralism. The draft of the new parliamentary election law will further hamper pluralism and it will promote fragmentation by reserving about 70 percent of parliamentary seats for independent candidates.

June 2014

Middle East Program





With the election of former Field Marshal and Defense Minister Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to the presidency, Egypt has reached the second signpost of the transition roadmap announced after the July 3, 2013 military takeover. Only parliamentary elections remain to be carried out and, despite the controversy already surrounding the new election law, the outcome is entirely predictable. Parliamentary seats will be filled by independent candidates – mostly local notables more interested in securing government patronage than in setting forth alternative ideas and policies and providing a counterweight to the power of the executive. Such a parliament will not provide effective checks and balances on the executive branch.

According to the official announcement, al-Sisi was elected with 96.91 percent of the valid votes, with his rival Hamdeen Sabbahi receiving a measly 3.9 percent. In fact, there were more spoiled ballots (about 5 percent) than votes for Sabbahi, but the election commission did not take those into account in calculating percentages, needlessly making al-Sisi's landslide victory look even more crushing.

Al-Sisi's victory was fully expected. Sabbahi never had a chance against the leader of the coup that ousted President Mohammed Morsi and sidelined the Muslim Brotherhood at the height of its unpopularity. Al-Sisi was also backed by the resources of the state and the adulation of both public and private mass media. Nevertheless, election results showed that such advantages were not sufficient to mobilize the majority of Egyptians to vote.

The official turnout figure is an underwhelming 47.45 percent, despite the extraordinary measures implemented to increase participation. Worried about the anemic turnout on the first day of voting, the government closed down public offices and shopping malls on the second day. The election commission even threatened to collect the fines the election law imposes on those who fail to vote without a valid excuse, a never before enforced and probably unenforceable provision. Finally, in a move dictated by desperation more than legality, the government extended voting into a third day. It is open to debate whether such extraordinary measures genuinely increased participation to the claimed 47 percent, or simply gave the government sufficient cover to artificially inflate participation – there is no hard evidence pointing either way. In any case, the announced results are in line with the results of the opinion survey conducted in April by the Pew Research Center, which measured al-Sisi's support at 54 percent.

Three conclusions stand out from the election results: first, al-Sisi is undoubtedly popular with many Egyptians, but many others remain apathetic or oppose him; second, with Morsi and the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood safely locked up in jail, many Egyptians are shifting from worrying about the excessive power of Islamists to being leery of the grip of the new regime;

third, whatever doubts exist about the new president and, more broadly, the new regime do not translate into support for specific individuals or opposition forces.

The military takeover was initially well received in Egypt. True, the crowds in the street demanding Morsi's resignation were nowhere nearly as large as the 30-40 million claimed by the official narrative. It is also true that the demonstrations were largely orchestrated by the state security apparatus, not by a group of young people incensed by Morsi's betrayal of their revolutionary ideals. But there is also little doubt that by July 2013 there existed among Egyptians a vast reservoir of anti-Morsi and anti-Brotherhood feelings the coup leaders could tap into—I watched this hostility grow during repeated research trips to Egypt.

But the military's subsequent actions led many to reconsider the implications of the takeover, and, by the time of the elections, the population was quite divided. Some genuinely idolized al-Sisi, attracted by his promise to restore order, the economy, and normality, as well as to bring Egypt back to its former status as an influential, respected country. Some continued to oppose him unconditionally. Among them were Morsi's supporters but, more importantly, also a growing number of liberals, leftists, and especially young people. The numbers are impossible to gauge—Egyptian media play down protests and invariably refer to all participants as Morsi's supporters. But protesting has continued even after the violent breakup of the pro-Morsi camps in Cairo in August 2013, particularly on university campuses. In addition, Egypt has also continued to experience a high and rarely discussed number of labor protests. Impossible to classify as pro-Morsi or anti-military—most are apparently motivated by economic revindications—labor protests indicate a continued high level of dissatisfaction with, and lack of confidence in, the government's capacity and/or willingness to address socioeconomic problems.

As attention shifts from the presidential to the forthcoming parliamentary election, mainstream political parties are also beginning to show concern about the new regime's apparent determination to close the political space and limit participation. Parties were quiet during the presidential elections, mostly backing al-Sisi, with a few choosing Sabbahi or asking their followers to boycott the elections, but all while sitting on the sidelines. With parliamentary elections coming up in a few months, political parties are becoming more vocal because they are threatened by the parliamentary election law being discussed, which minimizes the role of all political parties. The present draft calls for approximately 70 percent of the seats (420) to be filled by candidates running as independents, with only 20 percent, or 120 seats, contested by party lists. (The president can appoint up to 27 additional members). Seeing their role threatened by the law, political parties have for once been unanimous in their condemnation of the draft, even threatening to boycott the elections should it become law. It is too early to know whether the parties will succeed in maintaining a united position on this issue and thus gain a meaningful presence in the parliament, broadening the political spectrum beyond the narrow boundaries the new regime appears determined to impose.

After the turmoil of the past three years, which devastated the economy and worsened the country's chronic socioeconomic problems, Egypt needs a period of political stability in which the focus will shift from political struggles to formulating policies to start addressing problems. Political instability has sapped investor confidence and scared away tourists, drying up a major source of foreign currency earnings. Slow economic growth has exacerbated the problems created by the skewed income distribution, which worsened during the Mubarak years. A bankrupt government – the budget deficit for next year could reach 14 percent if no measures are taken – has little choice but to reduce subsidies on energy and food, in turn increasing discontent. Electricity production is insufficient to meet demand because of shortage of fuel for power generation, leading to constant blackouts. Most Egyptians, in other words, face outright catastrophe or endless aggravation in their daily life. The generous support provided and pledged to post-Morsi Egypt by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates will keep Egypt afloat for the time being, but the problems are just too large and complex for this aid to be more than a palliative.

Egypt needs stability to address these problems. Closing the political space, as the regime is trying to do, is unlikely to bring either stability or a solution to these festering problems.



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Edited by Kendra Heideman and Mona Youssef
Designed by Kendra Heideman
Middle East Program
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars