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Egypt: Parliamentary Elections in the Shadow of 2000

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In considering whether parliamentary elections to begin November 9 will mark a significant step toward democratization in Egypt, one can begin by asking how much has changed since the last such elections five years ago. This is especially relevant because the political parties and forces contesting the 444 elected seats (two each in 222 districts; 10 more are appointed) of the People's Assembly will operate on lessons learned in 2000.

For the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), the 2000 election constituted a wake-up call due to the success of independent candidates. The NDP managed to win only 172 seats or 38 percent, and was salvaged from this embarrassing situation only after 216 independent candidates joined (or rejoined, as many had been NDP members) the party after the election, giving the NDP a strong majority. This was a clear sign of the NDP's weakness and deterioration, particularly among its rank and file, and it alerted the leadership to the immediate need for structural change in the party.

For this year's elections, the NDP is attempting to reinvigorate through a more rigorous process of choosing candidates, who are proposed by local party officials and approved by an NDP leadership committee. As ever, the NDP is also seeking to benefit from its connection to the state apparatus and the promise of patronage to lure voters. These tactics could enable the NDP to win between 70 and 80 percent of the seats, assuming (despite public statements to the contrary) that it will again form post-election alliances with amenable independent candidates.

If the NDP showing in 2000 was embarrassing, that of the legal opposition parties was abysmal; all told they won 17 seats or 3.7 percent of the assembly. Independents associated with the banned Muslim Brotherhood won an additional 17. On October 8 several opposition groups and movements announced the formation of a "National Front for Change" and pledged to coordinate on choosing candidates to oppose the NDP. Participants include the liberal Wafd, leftist Tagammu, and Nasserist parties; the as-yet unlicensed Wasat and Karama parties, offshoots of the Muslim Brotherhood and Nasserists respectively; the Egyptian Movement for Change (Kifaya) and three other pro-reform movements; and the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood joined the Front with an important caveat, however, saying that while it was with the Front in spirit it would coordinate neither on candidates nor on political slogans in the coming elections. The other obvious gap in the new opposition front is Ayman Nour's liberal Ghad Party, whose participation may be problematic due to Nour's well-known independence as well as opposition from the Wafd (from which Nour was ousted several years ago).

Despite the new coalition, the legal opposition parties are not likely to realize large gains in the elections. First, there is little to suggest that the coalition will be able to convince a large number of voters of its agenda, as was clear from the results of the presidential election in which all opposition candidates together garnered a total of 11 percent of the vote. Second, the Brotherhood and the Ghad Party will offer competition for the limited pro-opposition vote. While the Ghad Party probably will win only a few seats, the Muslim Brotherhood plans to enter at least 150 races (twice as many as in 2000) and might win 30 or more seats if its candidates succeed at the same rate as they did give years ago. This will be the case especially if the government continues its relatively lenient treatment of the Brothers, fewer of whom are now in jail than is typical in an electoral season.

Moreover, structural aspects of the electoral system continue to impede greater opposition representation, despite the fact that this year's elections might be cleaner and more transparent than those of 2000 due to fuller judicial supervision and independent monitoring. Opposition representation in the People's Assembly has never recovered from the 1990 change to a district system instead of proportional representation, which allowed the opposition to win 22 percent of the Assembly in 1987 elections. Widespread problems in the voter registry, a problem as yet unaddressed, are another way in which the problems of 2000 live on.

In light of these considerations, the NDP can be expected to maintain its dominant position, although perhaps with a larger and livelier opposition contingent in parliament. It will be a strategic priority for the NDP to prevent the emergence of a coalition of opposition parties and independents in the Assembly in order to ward off the possibility of an independent (non-party) candidate competing against the NDP in the next presidential election. Amended Article 76 of the Egyptian constitution stipulates that to compete for the presidential post, an independent candidate must obtain 250 signatures from parliament and municipal council members, 100 of those from the People's Assembly.

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