

Egypt Goes to the Polls

Written by Tariq Ramadan

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TARIQ RAMADAN, MAY 30 2012

If the Middle East is a complex region, Egypt is quite a complicated country. For more than a year now the entire world, and Egyptians in particular, have witnessed a major social upheaval. The masses have arisen, driven Mubarak from power and touched off a profound sense of arousal among peoples throughout the Arab world and far beyond. It was possible, they proved, to overthrow a despot, influence the course of events, and join forces in writing a fresh page in history.

No one can deny the urge for renewal, the awakening, and the newfound awareness. Whichever forces helped train the bloggers and the cyber-dissidents, whatever the foreign and domestic pressure, this new sense of collective awareness represents the best of the movements that have remade the Middle East. But we must not be overcome by the optimism generated by the popular uprisings and rush to conclusions without an in-depth analysis of what is at stake economically and geopolitically on a national and regional scale. Since the uprisings began in 2010, I have warned that the forces that spurred on and supported them were neither spontaneous nor disinterested. Developments in each country, from Tunisia to Syria by way of Egypt, have borne out my predictions: we must remain prudently optimistic.

Egypt's presidential election has been particularly revealing. Recent parliamentary elections proved surprising, given the first-place finish by the Muslim Brotherhood and the even more startling emergence of a Salafi party, an-Nour, as a strong second. The country's new constitution has not yet been written; the committee responsible for drafting it has been all but dissolved. Candidates were often approved, and then rejected based on procedures that were far from clear and transparent. Political parties and individual candidates avoided polemics so as not to poison the atmosphere despite accusations that former regime holdouts and even the Armed Forces were tampering with the rules behind the scenes.

It was to be "Egypt's first free election". A dozen candidates faced off in the first round, with four among them seen as serious contenders: two candidates more or less close to the autocratic regime, Amr Moussa and Ahmad Shafiq; and two more or less Islamists' candidates linked with the Muslim Brotherhood, Muhammad Morsi and Abd al-Mun'im Abul Futuh. Opinion polls and predictions presented one or the other as front-runner or second-place finisher. No one apparently was able to predict the winner. Strange alliances emerged: the Salafi party threw its weight behind Abul Futuh, even though he is considered "much more liberal" compared to Morsi. The role of the Salafis in the electoral process remains murky (since even before the Parliamentary elections). Much was made of Amr Moussa, as though he represented the only secularist alternative while Ahmad Shafiq, who had actually already governed the country, was "forgotten." It is difficult to get a clear reading of the facts.

The scenario that appears to be unfolding could prove to be quite attractive for the former regime and the Armed Forces, whose economic and political clout remain determinant. The defeat of Abul Futuh, the candidate favored by the younger generation of Islamists and the bloggers who had originally supported Muhammad al-Baradei, and the disappearance of Amr Moussa, a secularist who might have proven difficult to control, has handed them an interesting situation, paradoxical though it might seem at first glance. A victory for the Muslim Brotherhood candidate, with Ahmad Shafiq close behind, may well present them with the two best short or long-term options.

They could well brandish the specter of Islamism, and mobilize Egypt against the threat of Muslim Brotherhood

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control of both the parliament and presidency. The Brotherhood could well lose the election to a representative of the old regime committed to protecting the interests of the oligarchy. Or, it could experience, in the long term, a loss of credibility in the exercise of power. There is little reason to believe that a Turkish-type outcome—modeled on the AKP's successful integration into the capitalist system—will come about in Egypt. The two countries cannot be compared on either economic terms or with regard to regional issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and relations with the other Arab countries (from the petromonarchies to Syria and Yemen, not to mention the Sunni-Shia divide).

The Arab uprisings have not yet established political transparency. Political maneuvering, back stabbing and power seeking continue to be the rule; the hopes and aspirations of the people are barely considered, let alone respected. The road will be long, and today's apparent winners will not necessarily be those who we expect. The sense of awareness that has been awakened throughout the Arab world must not allow itself to be lulled to sleep. If indeed a revolutionary process is underway (though clearly incomplete), today it must muster its power of resistance and change. Nothing definitive has as yet been achieved; manipulation will continue. To those who believe Egypt's presidential vote will settle all outstanding questions, we say that these dangerous illusions must be discarded. It is precisely because Egypt is a great country deeply caught up in the main issues of the day that politicians and intellectuals, true democrats with demonstrated ethical credibility and determination are needed and must come to the fore.

The situation is critical. Without the awareness and courage needed to reject meddling, it may well be that the country's presidential election turn out to be less a new chapter in a more democratic future than an old chapter complete with a stage-managed outcome. The worst possible result, after the fall of the dictatorship, would be an ostensibly democratic solution featuring real-life political figures on stage, playing out—while playthings—a production designed by a handful of economic and military operatives, foreign and domestic, who have learned from history that it is possible to deceive people with well-chosen words, by pandering to their illusions or exploiting their fears. The game is far from won in Egypt; that much is certain.

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