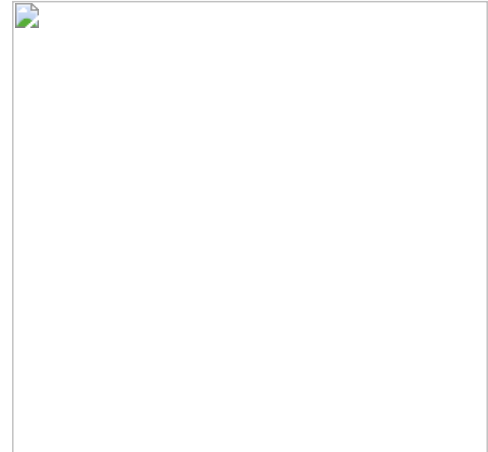


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Egyptian Elections Controversy Reveals Older Ideological Struggle

Magdalena C. Delgado

By Sarah Jones. The domestic policies of Egypt's military government have come under great international scrutiny due to its position as the immediate caretakers of the post-Mubarak state. That scrutiny has been fuelled by recent controversial decisions that some activists allege constitute human rights violations and a threat to the democratic process. These decisions, which range from the acquittal of a doctor accused of conducting 'virginity tests' on female activists to its direct interference in the current presidential elections, seem to reinforce concerns that the military's association with the Mubarak administration have made it sympathetic to the brand of repression practiced by the former regime. They also indicate dual concerns on the part of the ruling government. First, they indicate the existence of a broader ideological divide between the Egyptian state and Islamist factions that dates to the earliest days of the postcolonial era. Egypt's Islamists have historically reacted negatively to policies perceived to be strongly influenced by Western values or Western political interference, and the support granted to Mubarak by the international community has made both the West and Mubarak's associates deeply unpopular. Second, the regime wishes to remain in power. Islamist candidates like Khairat al-Shater of the Muslim Brotherhood enjoy significant popular support, and their campaigns poised a real challenge to the military's continued control over the affairs of state. The regime must also separate itself from Mubarak in order to avoid becoming the target of another revolution. The decision to ban these candidates, as well as the specific candidates targeted by the ban, are likely part of a sustained effort to solidify control and avoid another coup.



Voters await entry into polling stations guarded by the military in Alexandria, Egypt

Obviously, these are not the reasons given by the military when pressed by activists for the candidates' exclusion from the race. According to official statements issued to the press and the documentation provided to the candidates themselves, irregularities over campaign donations and violations of previously established eligibility criteria resulted in the [disqualifications](#). Moreover, the military has argued that these disqualifications are evidence of its commitment to the establishment of a free civil society: it proves that they are adhering to current laws, and since a number of the candidates espoused a dedication to the creation of an Islamic state, they can only be considered a threat to democracy. These explanations have not satisfied activists, who view the decision to issue a ban as contrary to the democratic process. It has also inadvertently reignited convictions that the military, which enjoyed substantial political power under Mubarak's regime, is too closely influenced by Western powers to effectively advocate on behalf of Egyptian interests.

The Muslim Brotherhood and related factions have historically voiced support of an Islamist state in opposition to one often perceived as overly secularised, and therefore firmly located within the modern tradition of Western government. To a nation still reeling from the forced cultural assimilation that accompanied colonialism, the Brotherhood offered the possibility of a cohesive national identity based on traditional values defined by Islam rather than by Western thought. To the postcolonial state, however, the Brotherhood represented a clear threat, and it was banned along with other groups that espoused similar ideologies. The government's ruling appeared validated by the eventual militancy of several of these groups, and its repression of them gained it favour in the West despite its totalitarian nature and human rights abuses. The state's relationship with the West is still seen as a betrayal by many Egyptians, and factored into Mubarak's unpopularity. The military has miscalculated the level of support it enjoys among the general population by enacting policies that bear even a superficial resemblance to his more oppressive dictates.

Decisions carried out subsequent to the elections controversy indicate that although the military may have overestimated its popular support, it is not completely oblivious to the complications presented by the West's legacy of support for the hated Mubarak. Mubarak's Vice President, Omar Suleiman, was included in the list of banned candidates. The government also cancelled transmission of the natural gas supply from Egypt to Israel in a move that it insisted was motivated by a ['business dispute'](#) rather than political differences. Yet it is undeniable that this decision is politically beneficial for the government, as it will bolster its support among conservative Muslims as well as with activists due to mutual concerns over the resolution of the Palestinian crisis and Israel's close alliance with the United States. In a similar vein, the government has forbidden certain [American NGOs](#) from operating within Egyptian borders. These groups banned include the Carter Center and Coptic Orphans, dedicated to election monitoring and welfare aid respectively. This is not the first time the military regime has acted against foreign organisations; its raids of Western pro-democracy organisations made international news. The reach of Western influence has been seriously limited by this move.

The military seems intent on retaining its hold on the power it has gained in the wake of Mubarak's removal. It is understandably wary, then, of a revitalised Islamist movement, and despite its stated commitment to the free and fair elections demanded by activists, its policies reflect an innate wariness of the democratic process and a desire to control its outcome. As the elections proceed, it is likely that the military's interference will contradict its goals, and the Muslim Brotherhood and other conservative groups will gain further support among working class and rural Egyptians as they already benefit from their famed traditional opposition to a postcolonial regime that has always been criticised for its reliance on Western support.

Sarah Jones is currently pursuing MA studies in Postcolonial Culture and Global Policy at Goldsmiths College, University of London

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