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Election time in Egypt: a Rehearsal for the Big Show

LSE Ideas

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The recent election campaign for the Egyptian People's Assembly turns the limelight once again to this key regional actor. The elections themselves saw a predictable landslide victory for President Husni Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP) – including in some areas considered to be strongholds of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and other Islamist opposition groups. The elections did not get much coverage by the foreign media, other than sporadic reports on the violent clashes between MB supporters and the security forces, or some incidental reports on the accusation of fraud. Yet, mainly because of their proximity to the presidential elections, due to take place in September 2011, the elections provide us with an opportunity to assess future developments in Egypt.

Egyptian politics is often portrayed as a bipolarised system, an arena of struggle between the two 'giants' of Egyptian political life: the security apparatus, Mubarak's political habitat, on the one side; and political Islam, in particular the MB, on the other. Albeit being the NDP's presidential candidate, and therefore, in reality, the single candidate, Mr. Mubarak's advanced age (82) and rumoured shaky health have led some analysts to argue that he is soon to step off the chair of the presidency. Even if running for the presidency, the pundits suggest, he will not be able to complete the six years-term. In such case, they predict, the MB or other Islamist groups might make a move and try to seize control through a popular revolution à la Iran.

Although this scenario is not utterly unthinkable, it is quite a remote possibility. There are too many people in Egypt who prefer the status-quo to remain as it is – and this is not only the ruling oligarchy of officers, their allies among the businessmen, and bureaucrats but also the urban middle classes. Being well rooted in Egyptian society, the current Egyptian state is rather robust. And of course, we should not forget the role of the Mukhabarat (secret police), a formidable wall against revolutionary attempts. Finally, Mubarak and his cronies still enjoy American support – baffled by the consequences of the former administration's democracy promotion in the region, the Obama Administration only tepidly protested against the obvious frauds in the election campaign.

This is not to imply that Egyptians are prone to choose only between different forms of tyranny, as some commentators might suggest. Surely, given the opportunity, most Egyptians would be happy to vote for a responsible regime whose main aim is to meet the needs of the Egyptian people. But under current historical circumstances, the above presented scenarios are the most likely.

The real competition, probably, is within the elite. There is a near consensus that Mubarak is preparing his younger son, Gamal, as his successor. The President himself has made not much effort to refute such rumours. It is necessary to remember, nevertheless, that such a step may encounter wide public resistance. Gamal Mubarak is now a powerful member of the NDP and has a wide base of support – but is surely aware of the consequences of such an unpopular step. Another potential candidate, whose name has often been mentioned, is 'Omar Suleiman, the powerful director of the General Intelligence Directorate. Some argue that he may serve as an interim president, to be replaced in the future by Gamal Mubarak, but others view him as the current real power in Egypt and the future leader of the Egyptian state.

In terms of foreign policy, both men represent continuation of traditional approaches. Egypt will probably keep playing the mediating role between the Israelis and Palestinians, serve as pivotal member in the war on terror, and a bulwark against the perceived (real or exaggerated) Iranian threat.

It is worthwhile, nevertheless, to try and assess an Egypt dominated by the MB, or any other Islamist movement. Representatives of the MB have declared on various occasions that they would cut off relations with Israel if elected to power. Undoubtedly, the MB would be far less enthusiastic participants in the war against terror – although it should be recalled that the MB must not be affiliated with al-Qaeda and that the organisation has an interest to distance al-Qaeda affiliated factors from Egypt. Finally, Egypt under the MB may cease being an essential element in the camp which objects to the Iranian arms race (and by arms race I do not necessarily mean a nuclear arms race). In other words, Egypt under the MB would cease to be a stabilising factor in the region. And, if a central actor such as Egypt ceases to play the role of a regional moderator, all parties in the region might spiral into a period of distrust and uncertainty. With tensions already growing, this is probably the last thing states in the region need.

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