

Egypt's Presidential Elections: A Road to Nowhere?

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Executive Summary

Egypt's presidential elections epitomize the contradictions of the post-uprising period: the future President's powers are unknown, there is no constitution, and various parts of the security sector are attempting to marginalize pro-democracy opposition groups. Nonetheless, Egypt's basic problems remain: addressing political and economic instability through a proper process of transitional justice, security sector reform, and economic reform reconciling growth and social justice. If these issues are not addressed effectively by the new President, the Parliament and the future Constitutional Assembly, the transitional period may become a road to nowhere.

Issues

Egypt's presidential elections (23-24 May) take place in a legal and political vacuum, with most important questions regarding the post-Mubarak transition still wide open. There is still no Constitution, no clarity on the President's powers, no tangible process of transitional justice, no real Security Sector Reform (SSR), not to mention a coherent and consistent approach from government to economic reform, inclusive growth and social justice. The most disturbing aspect of this insecurity is that such "chaos" is being used by elements of the former regime, including the armed forces, to argue for a *slowdown* in the reform process, and to discredit and marginalize pro-democratic opposition groups pushing for the reforms demanded since the "January Revolution". Not least thanks to the armed forces' continuing control over and support from state media, this blame game has played largely into the hands of the military junta (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, SCAF).

In this constitutional vacuum, presidential candidates face the arduous task of addressing several pressing issues: *Security Sector Reform (SSR)*, *civil-military relations*, social justice and economic growth.

SSR and *civil-military relations* are perhaps the two most important issues concerning Egypt's post-uprising institutional configuration. The Ministry of Interior and the Armed Forces – uncomfortable allies during the Mubarak era – have managed to evade any substantial reform. The Ministry of Interior, which had grown increasingly powerful under Mubarak, has reshuffled some mid- and high-ranking officers, but despite former Interior Minister Habib Al-Adly's trial, there has been little evidence of serious reform. The Army has been trying to protect its independence, particularly its role in the Egyptian economy – estimated between 5% and 35% of GDP, effectively a "state within the state" – by avoiding any substantive civilian oversight. To do this, it has been prepared to arbitrarily stop or hijack the transition process, latterly stating it would retain "some" executive and powers for itself even after the election of Parliament and President, and the design of a new Constitution.

The most pressing issues for the majority of the population concern social justice and economic growth, in particular Egypt's considerable unemployment and under-employment

Keywords

Egypt, Middle East, EU, Democracy, Elections, Security Sector Reform

Quotables

- The transitional period may become a road to nowhere.

- Egypt's presidential elections epitomize the contradictions of the post-uprising period: the Presidency's powers are unknown, there is no Constitution, and elements of the former regime work to marginalize the pro-democracy opposition.

- Egypt must put in place a proper process of transitional justice, security sector reform, and economic growth with social justice.

- External actors, including the EU, should resist the temptation to support stability per se.

- Substantive and equitable economic reform is necessary, but past liberalization must be rethought.

Abstract

Egypt's elections epitomize the complex and often confused nature of the post-Mubarak transition. To ensure reforms do not end up on a „road to nowhere“, both internal and external actors need to focus on effective reforms which guarantee inclusion, both politically and economically.

problem. Already before the 2011 uprising, 40% of the population was estimated to live on less than \$2 a day. The armed forces⁶⁶ and the Ministry of Interior's apparent unwillingness to provide effective policing – an apparent tactic to delegitimize groups in favour of the uprising – has scared off tourists and increased insecurity for the population.

The election front-runners appear to be Abdel Moneim Aboul Futouh (former Muslim Brotherhood youth leader who broke away over his support for the January Uprising); Amr Moussa (former Arab League General Secretary and Mubarak Foreign Minister); Ahmad Shafiq (general, and last Prime Minister appointed by Mubarak); Hamdeen Sabbahi (centre-left nationalist respected opposition figure); and Muhammad Morsy (leader of the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party). Polling has varied widely, but candidates with the best-funded and best-organised campaigns are Morsy, Aboul Futouh, Moussa and Shafiq. If no candidate achieves a majority of votes, a run-off will be held on June 6th. For "revolutionary" candidates like Sabbahi or Aboul Futouh who can more realistically claim to represent the demands formulated by the 2011. Uprising, the road remains tortuous: even if elected, they face the formidable and entrenched opposition of an array of supporters of the former regime. Prospects for reform under these conditions remain dim.

Implications

The cost of reform processes not being substantive and effective will be a de facto return to a regime configured much like Mubarak's before the uprising. This is likely to produce a process of more or less gradual radicalization such as the one which led up to the "January Revolution⁶⁷".

If SSR and inclusive growth are not addressed effectively by the new President, the Parliament, and the future Constitutional Assembly, the transitional period may become a road to nowhere. This outcome would not necessarily represent a loss for the military junta, which has attempted – with a degree of success – to consolidate its power by presenting itself as a force for order against chaos.

In this context, economic reform policies must be carefully calibrated to avoid the twin effects of wealth polarisation and "oligarchization" which discredited Mubarak-era reforms. The EU's role in this respect is crucial, and a continued emphasis on past liberalisation strategies – such as DFTAs currently offered – is likely to backfire both politically and economically, despite being welcomed by business elites on both Islamist and Mubarak-era sides.

However, for neighbouring states, and particularly for Europe, the lack of reforms in Egypt is likely to entail a continuation – at best, more realistically a worsening – of pre-uprising issues, including migration and political radicalization at a time when Southern EU Member States in particular are likely to be undergoing further socio-economic polarization and political radicalization.

Recommendations

To support an effective transition process, outside actors should engage with Egypt in order to encourage SSR, support inclusive economic growth, and improve support for pro-democratic groups through existing instruments (e.g. EIDHR). The forms of this support – particularly in relation to civil society – should be very carefully designed, to take into account the fragile reputation Western governments have as supporters of democratic transition in the region. The EU and member states can continue to offer electoral support, but they should also focus on plans for economic growth which rely less on discredited forms of liberalization.

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