

Egypt's Constitutional Referendum: Not About the Islamists

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Executive Summary

The vote in the upcoming referendum on Constitutional amendments is often presented as a test of strength pitting on the one hand the Muslim Brotherhood, their Salafi allies, and a resurgent NDP, and on the other hand the civil society and liberal left groups who are pushing for deeper change. People voting yes, however, span the ideological spectrum. They vote yes either to re-establish stability, or to consolidate gains of the revolution against the authoritarian temptations of the military or the Ikhwan. In this sense, a 'yes' vote is primarily a test of the degree to which Egyptians feel insecure – a test of the degree to which they fear either the old regime's resurgence or the Muslim Brotherhood's authoritarian temptations.

Issues

The build-up to Egypt's first post-revolutionary constitutional referendum has been fraught with controversy. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) was first accused by some of hijacking the democratic reformist spirit of the uprising by appointing a panel of (unrepresentative and conservative) Constitutional experts to amend the constitution instead of allowing the formation of a Constitutional Assembly which would re-write Egypt's Constitution from scratch. The amendments, pushed through in what many feared would be a rushed process lasting only ten years, were criticized for retaining some of the old Constitution's restrictions (e.g. Art. 2's specification that the president must be a Muslim male).

Some groups – particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, extremist Salafis, and the remnants of the NDP – attempted to portray the referendum as a vote of confidence in them as political groups, provoking much debate about the rise of Islamists in post-revolutionary vacuum and fears of an 'Islamist Dilemma' in European capitals. Many of the civil society and labour organisations which were crucial in organising and conducting the uprising, particularly early on, however, called for a 'No' vote as a way of putting pressure on the SCAF for quicker and deeper reforms, particularly the election of a President, after which a constituent process would draft a constitution ex novo.

However, this broad split between socially and politically conservative leaderships on the one hand and the progressive liberals and leftists on the other did not reflect the split of Egyptian society. There were many liberals and leftists who disagreed with their leaderships, while the progressive youth in the Muslim Brotherhood – which had been equally central to the early days of the revolution, against their leadership's explicit orders – were unhappy about the process and content of the constitutional amendments.

Keywords

Egypt, Middle East, United States, Democracy

Quotables

- The 'Yes' vote is often presented as an endorsement of the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafi extremists, or the NDP. But 'yes' voters span the political spectrum: they vote yes either to ensure stability, or to secure revolutionary gains against the authoritarian temptations of the military or the Brotherhood.

- Attempts to make support for democratic elections conditional on their outcome have always produced long-term blowback.

- European governments' interest in stability, security and growth in Egypt are best pursued by encouraging democracy and social justice simultaneously.

Abstract

Egypt's referendum on Constitutional amendments is the first significant test of the Egyptian Revolution's democratic aspirations. Amidst fears of a resurgent NDP or a newly dominant Muslim Brotherhood, it is often presented as a test of their strength.

But a 'yes' vote also represents a way of consolidating the uprising's gains and reducing instability and insecurity in post-revolutionary Egypt.

In the event, the ‘Yes’ option received nearly two thirds of the vote. While the Brotherhood and Salafi groups were quick to claim this as an endorsement of their movements and their politics, this conclusion is self-serving: some undoubtedly voted according to ‘party’ lines, but for many others this was seen as a chance to either reign in the instability of post-revolutionary period or to insure key gains against any temptations parts of the military might feel to use the transitional period’s instability to intervene permanently in Egyptian politics. For these two segments of the population, a ‘yes’ vote was a politically cautious, but nonetheless progressive choice.

Much more important than even the outcome of the referendum is the fact that the first free vote in Egypt’s republican history was held at all, and that it went off largely without incidents, unlike elections under Mubarak. Most significant of all was the turnout: for the first time voter turnout was actually measure officially, coming out at around 41% nation-wide. Previously, the turnout was not counted officially, only estimated. Even then, the regime’s most optimistic figures would put turnout at around 25%, while opposition groups like the Judges Club often – and more realistically – estimated around 5%, and the UN estimated just under 20%.

Implications

The process and result of the referendum has been welcomed cautiously by European governments. A recurring concern appears to be with the possible ‘Islamisation’ of Egypt.

Options

At stake in for Egypt during this transition are its political but also economic direction. The implications of this trajectory for the international community are considerable, and the posture of both the US and European governments will significantly influence Egypt’s fortunes over the next year in particular. Politically, the international community’s options range from maintaining its historical priority of stability and security over democracy, through conditional support for specified electoral outcomes (e.g. ostracising the Muslim Brotherhood), to unconditional support for the democratic process.

Recommendations

Conditional support ought to be broadly discounted, short of the emergence of political forces which would renege on fundamental human rights. The political costs of attempts to ostracise if not prevent the emergence of Islamist forces in particular cannot be underestimated: whenever this has been attempted – whether in the case of radical organisations such as Hamas or Hizballah, or more moderate groups such as Algeria’s FIS or the AKP in Turkey – it has resulted in long-term political blowback. European states should provide unconditional endorsement of both the process of democratic elections and their outcome. This will bolster the prospects for democratic transition within Egypt, helping stabilise the country both economically and politically. It will also reinforce the EU’s reputation – currently precarious, from an Egyptian standpoint – for democratic values, and commensurately increase Europe’s ‘soft power’ and its regional influence, with potentially positive outcomes for the Mediterranean’s regional stability.

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