MEI Insight No. 92
4 March 2013

Middle East Insights

Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore

The Forecast for Egyptian Politics: Overcast

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As Egypt's April parliamentary elections draw closer, many analysts are being asked for their outlook and predictions for the future of this critical Arab country. Initial observations from the more seasoned of Egypt watchers point to overcast skies. The state of being overcast, as defined by the World Meteorological Organization, occurs when clouds obscure all of the heavens. As commentators attempt to make sense of the murky current political situation, it is appropriate to first speak of the sky before the clouds began to cover it.

The sky was clearest at the beginning of Egypt's new phase. Those first 18 days in Tahrir Square beginning on 25 January 2011 were astounding, particularly in regard to how individual citizens and groups of citizens materialized and changed the course of political history. One of the most famous figures of the uprisings was Emad Effat, a scholar from al-Azhar, who is known for having said, "The first time I walked into Tahrir Square was the first time I saw Egypt." The possibility of a united Egypt is what brought the crowds to Tahrir day after day, rather than Mubarak per se.

Yet that possibility of unification, now two years on, seems a naïve wish. Many forces who were in Tahrir, as well as those who did not come, have broken off from one another.

The most organized political body was—and is—the Muslim Brotherhood. Soon after Mubarak was forced out of power in February 2011, it looked as if the group would be judicious in how it played the political game. It would not run for more than a minority of the parliamentary seats, it said, and it would not propose a presidential candidate. Essentially, it would continue along a path of gradual change as opposed to a power grab.

It must be said that the Brotherhood enjoyed a great deal of goodwill from the populace after a long history of persecution by the Mubarak regime. But it then decided to run for not 30 percent but 50 percent of parliament, and it separated from other forces that had initially supported the overthrow of Mubarak, instead establishing its own special relationship with the military. It ran not one, but two, presidential candidates. One, Muhammad Morsi, who went up against Ahmed Shafik, Mubarak's last prime minister, barely won.

In November 2012, Morsi managed to destroy any goodwill that remained outside of close Brotherhood allies via his constitutional declaration, which placed presidential decisions beyond judicial review. His rush through the constitution—a document whose flaws were criticized by many observers inside and outside of Egypt —also did not go unmissed.

The Brotherhood knows that voter turnout for the upcoming parliamentary elections is likely to be low. Indeed, it was incredibly low for the December 2012 constitutional referendum—less than a third of registered voters. For the parliamentary elections, the turnout is likely to be around the same amount, if not less. Such a situation will benefit the Brotherhood because the group's core supporters are likely to vote.

However, a narrow victory does not mean success for the Brotherhood overall. Morsi has the mandate of someone who only barely won against a member of the old regime. This position, which lacks the consensus that would expand his mandate, creates difficulty for him as he seeks to change the institutions of the state. While Morsi may hold his presidency together, and while the Brotherhood's political wing, the Freedom and Justice Party, may control parliament, the power they have will be less than what they need to make any real changes to the system.

As for the military, it is clear that it is not interested in ruling Egypt. On the contrary, the reason Muhammad Tantawi and Sami Annan were forced out in August 2012 is likely due precisely to the military's broad desire *not* to be bogged down with governance issues (unlike Tantawi and Annan). And the military doesn't need to rule, as it by and large received everything it desired in the last constitutional arrangement, including independence from oversight of its budget, its own courts, and control over defense and war. The military will only intervene if it feels that its interests are threatened by instability in the country—such as what occurred with the downfall of Mubarak. If it feels that such a situation is again taking place, it will probably act. However, with

a Brotherhood government in charge, intervention could come at quite a cost, as it would likely be met with a forceful and perhaps violent rebuttal from the forces that support the government.

In the parliamentary elections of 2012, the major Salafi political party, Hizb al-Nour, performed well, achieving a fifth of the seats. It is doubtful that al-Nour will repeat such success. The party's leadership is now split; in fact, most of its leadership departed and started another party, al-Watan. There are also a myriad of Salafi parties now, so the vote will be split even further among them. Finally, the Brotherhood will likely fight even harder than before for seats at the expense of the Salafi parties.

The other parliamentary political force is not particularly well defined but is generally described as the "liberals" or the "left." Regardless of these labels—which are labels of identity rather than ideas—this group performed rather poorly in the previous parliamentary elections. These players are now generally described as the "political opposition" and are identified with the National Salvation Front (NSF), headed by Muhammad ElBaradei—though there are still key opposition forces, such as Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh's Strong Egypt Party, that are not part of the NSF.

The National Salvation Front has become the group that misses no opportunity to miss an opportunity. The forces that comprise it could have chosen a single candidate in the presidential elections and would likely have won against Morsi and Shafik. They did not; they split the vote between Aboul Fotouh, Hamdeen Sabahi, and Amr Moussa. When the constitutional referendum came about, they could have organized immediately for a no vote. They did not; rather, they only officially pushed for a no vote approximately 48 hours beforehand. They also could have used the huge protests and disaffection against the constitution to deepen their base across the country; they did not. To this day, the NSF is still unknown, or is not trusted, by a majority of Egyptians.

Hence, while it is clear that the country has lost a great deal of respect for the Muslim Brotherhood, it is equally clear that most Egyptians have a lack of regard for the NSF. Indeed, as mentioned, neither the Brotherhood nor the NSF could mobilize a majority of the population for or against the constitutional referendum. The NSF's latest move, in which it called for the downfall of the regime and trials for Morsi and his interior minister, was a politically bizarre but also embarrassing move—because virtually no one

paid any attention to it at all. The NSF has declared that it will boycott the upcoming elections, potentially rendering the group even more marginal.

This discussion now leaves us with three other political forces to consider. The first are the revolutionaries, for lack of a better word; they are those that regardless of their political affiliation have been agitating for the success of the revolution's goals of social justice, freedom, and dignity. They themselves have become divided into different groups, as while many have pushed for deep engagement with the political arena, others have become disillusioned. A number of these revolutionaries ironically operate within the second level of leadership in many political forces, such as the Dostour Party; as such, we may see their agendas come to fruition in the future. But for the moment, they are not a political force to be reckoned with.

The second force consists of the "remnants" of the Mubarak regime, which the Brotherhood often casts as the enemy that is holding it back from progress. While the deep state is not strong in terms of political organization, within the institutions of the state there are forces that still remain aligned in thought, if not in leadership, with the former regime. Many—not simply the Brotherhood—are concerned. The reality is that these remnants can only be dealt with through a consensus of political forces that provides the government with a mandate to enact serious restructuring and reform; otherwise, they will continue.

The third force is everyone else. People describe this group as "Hizb al-Kanaba," or "The Party of the Couch." Up until relatively recently, this portion of the country, which is probably the majority, was not deeply politicized one way or the other. These citizens were cautious about the revolution but supported the overthrow of Mubarak. Many of them are still at home, though some have opted to go into the streets as they have grown more concerned about the dominance of the Brotherhood. Will they decide to come out for the parliamentary elections, and will that make a difference? No one knows yet for sure—but if they do, they could cause quite an upset.
Thus Egypt's political future is very uncertain, and too many have tried to predict it to no avail. The reality is that we are still very much in a time of transition and flux. What is clear, nevertheless, is that Egypt remains incredibly important and that the region's—as well as the world's—powers cannot afford to let it slip. In the meantime, the situation is likely to get more difficult. We must wait to see where and when the clouds will part.

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