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Egypt: Stormy Elections Close a Turbulent Year

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The headline of the state-owned newspaper *Al Ahram* described December 7 (the last day of voting in Egypt's month-long, three-stage parliamentary election) as “the most violent day” of the election. The independent daily *Al Masry Al Yom* went a bit further. Under photos of mayhem that could have been shot in Nablus or Ramallah, the newspaper declared that “Egypt can now breathe a sigh of relief. The elections officially ended yesterday.” Its tongue-in-cheek banner read in bold letters: “Ceasefire.”

The November 9-December 9 parliamentary elections were to have been the pinnacle of a year during which political reform and democratization overwhelmingly topped the nation's agenda and dominated public discourse. They have proven anti-climactic to say the least. In terms of violence, thuggery, chaotic and manipulated voter lists, police repression, intervention and coercion by state bodies, flagrant vote buying and vote rigging, this year's poll rivals the worst elections the nation has seen since the uniquely free parliamentary poll of 1976. And while ballot-stuffing has been rendered more difficult in general as a result of judicial supervision, there have been numerous well-documented instances of the most barefaced rigging of the results, on occasion with judicial complicity, and more often in flagrant disregard for the judiciary, including threats of violence and actual physical attacks on judges.

The most prominent form of electoral misconduct this time around, however, was to attack the electorate itself. Hired thugs, many of them absurdly wielding swords, provided the overriding image of the 2005 poll. The evidence overwhelmingly pointed to candidates of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), including renegade members running against the official party ticket, as the real culprits behind the rampaging thugs. Invariably, the police stood by while the NDP-supporting thugs attacked and intimidated voters. In the later stages of the poll, the police abandoned even the pretense of a neutral posture. They prevented voters from casting their ballots by laying siege to polling stations, as well as to whole villages and urban districts in which opposition (mostly Muslim Brotherhood) candidates enjoyed strong bases of support, leading to violent confrontations between anti-riot squads and angry opposition supporters. With at least ten dead and scores injured, one human rights organization compared NDP and police behavior in stage three of the election to operations “Desert Storm” and “Desert Shield” combined.

Moreover, results of the 2005 poll underline the conclusion that the Egyptian political system is in deep crisis. For the first time in Egyptian parliamentary history, the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood seized 88 seats of the People's Assembly, accounting for 20 percent of a total of 432 races concluded so far (polling has been postponed by judicial order in six constituencies, accounting for the remaining 12 elected seats; President Mubarak has appointed another ten). And although the NDP has maintained its overwhelming majority in parliament, easily crossing the two-thirds mark needed to pass constitutional amendments by seizing 311 seats (73 percent of the total), a closer look at the numbers reveals a ruling party that seems to be coming apart at seams. In fact, the official ticket of the NDP—notwithstanding the rigging, violence and intimidation—met with resounding failure, with 287 NDP candidates having lost their races, giving the ruling party's official ticket a success ratio of 34 percent. The NDP only gained its majority by reinstating renegade members who ran as independents against official party candidates.

No less serious has been the equally resounding failure of the legal, secular (or semi-secular) opposition, with the Wafd Party winning a mere six seats, the leftist Tagammu two, the Nasserist Karama (not yet licensed) two, and one seat to a breakaway faction from the Ghad Party. All legal opposition party leaders failed to win back their seats, including the Arab Nasserist Party's Diaaeddin Dawoud, Tagammu's Khaled Mohieddin and Al Ghad's Ayman Nour.

Is Egypt's political future destined, then, to hang between the decaying and crumbling semi-secular authoritarianism of the NDP and the rising, and considerably more vigorous, Islamist authoritarianism of the Muslim Brotherhood? It is too early to tell. For the time being, however, the proverbial Cairo spring has proved to be just as fleeting as that much sung season invariably is in our desert-besieged valley. As 2005 draws to a close, it is autumn—at the outset of which 77-year old President Hosni Mubarak embarked on his fifth six-year term at the nation's helm—that seems to provide a more fitting metaphor for the paroxysms and transformations that grip the Egyptian polity. It is in terms of decay, and not yet renewal—the twilight of an era, rather than the advent of a new one—that the sea change in the political life of Egypt over the past year can be made intelligible.

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