

NILE VIEW

Egypt Looking forward

By Nabil Fahmy

Egypt recently concluded its first parliamentary election since the June 30, 2013 revolution. In doing so it has completed the political roadmap adopted on July 3 of that year and regularized its political institutions with both an elected president and parliament.

As such, the election of a new parliament constitutes a significant step forward. It formally reestablishes a representative body with the traditional legislative and regulatory functions that since 2013 have been the prerogative of the interim and then the elected president of Egypt.

Equally important and irrespective of whether or not the new parliament is efficient, Egypt will return once again to the practice of public discussion of policy and governance issues in a representative body rather than simply on the heated and theatrical talk show circuit.

Whatever the inclinations of the political majority or kingmakers in parliament, the mere election of a parliament in itself has the potential to reaffirm an important political practice. Hopefully, it will gradually reinstate or create a sound political culture that embraces the principle that governments are held accountable to parliamentary representatives elected by the people.

In essence, this election was important because in theory it established the checks and balances that are imperative for the proper functioning of any political system and constitute the best safeguard for better, if not good, governance.

Progress has occurred in Egypt's political landscape, albeit the heavy-handed political maneuvering before the election and the generally negative inferences regarding the role of the parliament deflated the public enthusiasm towards this final step in the roadmap. This was clearly reflected in the significantly low level of voter participation.

Another anomaly was that candidates did not really bother to present their policy platforms or party programs during their campaigns, focusing instead on highlighting their personal achievements and announcing a wide range of promises that will inevitably remain unmet. Most of the election victors therefore do not represent significantly different political trends, but are essentially those who had well-oiled or efficiently managed election machines. Consequently, while many of these genuine candidates and/or those running as surrogates for others among Egypt's political old guard have gained seats in the parliament, it remains too early to define the political color or appetite of this new body.

With all these concerns, the elections did witness some positive indicators. Serious complaints about administrative violations in the voting process itself were extremely limited. On election day, allegations of violations were sometimes addressed by candidates to their competitors rather than to the government.

Interesting as well, about 30 percent of the seats were won by candidates from political parties that were initially thought to be weak and ineffective. While low, this figure was in fact much higher than expected. And, amongst the 70 percent of independent victors, many will ultimately join parliamentary party blocs established by the parties.

Another positive indicator was that youth, women, and non-Muslims won a much larger number of seats than has been the case in past elections. While this can be partially attributed to provisions in the new constitution, their presence in the parliament is nevertheless a breath of fresh air.

Mainstream supporters of both the January 25, 2011 and June 30, 2013 revolutions hoped for a more satisfying parliamentary election to celebrate this final step in the roadmap and to feel more optimistic about building a better future. I believe we could have done better had the parliament been promoted as an indispensable tool in good governance rather than a potential impediment to the president and governmental authority. Of greatest concern to me was not who won or lost, but the low participation and that over a half million votes were deemed invalid. The abstentions and invalidated ballots appear to be indications that a significant percentage of the electorate intentionally spoiled their votes in protest.

Realistically, given the political landscape before 2011 and the absence of pluralistic politics for over six decades, Egypt needs time for a true change of political culture to make significant steps towards a well-functioning democracy. In the best circumstances this is

cumbersome and often difficult to manage. Nevertheless, Egypt now has elected a parliament and it must now build a democracy.

The new Egypt should be increasingly transparent, with freedom of information being an accepted principle regulated by law. The political system must culturally embrace accountability as a fundamental practice. This will encourage constituents to remain proactive in following their representatives and empower them to exercise their prerogative as overseers of the executive bodies. Accountability will also drive executives to excel in their performance and deter them from abusing the power and authority they have acquired.

Personally, I had much higher hopes for Egypt than where we are today. My aspirations may have been a bit unrealistic. Yet, many of the problems or mistakes we have witnessed could have been avoided if the appropriate checks and balances imperative in any political system had been put in place earlier. Hopefully, the election of the new parliament will place us on the path towards a better political equilibrium between the organs of governance in the country and will lead us gradually towards truly pluralistic politics. Looking at the candidate lists of those elected, and recognizing the lack of political expertise that prevails, I am doubtful but I have not lost hope. And I will be the first to applaud if the new parliament proves me wrong.

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