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Egypt: Local Elections...the End of the Democratic Spring

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The local elections to be held on April 8 confirm the continuing authoritarian hegemony over political life in Egypt, despite talk of new thinking and democratic transformation. The National Democratic Party (NDP) has insisted on monopolizing the electoral process by excluding other political forces' candidates, whether those of the (outlawed) Muslim Brotherhood or of the legal opposition parties. Interventions in the electoral process have included complicating or delaying electoral procedures as well as arresting, expelling, or intimidating many candidates. Unfortunately, the law regulating elections (Law 43/1979) allows abuses such as these, as it gives sweeping powers to the executive authority in regulating various stages of the electoral process including nominating candidates, campaigning, and announcing election results.

The Muslim Brotherhood put forward roughly 5,000 members to compete for some 53,000 seats at the different levels of local elections (village, district, governorate), of whom only 500 were able to register. Meanwhile, opposition parties put forward some 4,000 candidates (1,700 from the liberal al-Wafd, 600 from the leftist Tagammu', and 700 from the liberal al-Ghad), of whom only 1,200 successfully registered.

Another notable aspect of the candidate registration process was the tough competition among members of the ruling NDP to enter the elections, with a number of districts witnessing intense contests between those desiring to be candidates under the party's banner. Some 600 NDP members resigned in protest, a scene replicating what has taken place in the party before legislative elections in recent years.

This year's local elections are more important than those of the past for several reasons. They are the first local elections to take place under the constitutional amendments passed in March 2007. Specifically, Article 76 stipulates that any independent candidate wishing to compete for the presidency must obtain the support of 140 members of the locally elected councils (ten from each of the fourteen governorates' councils) in addition to the support of no fewer than ninety members of

the Egyptian parliament (sixty-five from the People's Assembly and twenty-five from the Shura Council). With its eighty-eight deputies in the People's Assembly, the Brotherhood—if it won more than 140 local seats—would lack only the Shura Council seats to be within shooting distance of getting a candidate on the presidential ballot.

The ruling establishment also has other reasons to try to prevent increased opposition representation. Corruption in local government has reached unprecedented levels, as government officials have acknowledged, creating fears in the NDP that misdeeds over the past three decades might be exposed if increased oversight was instituted. In addition, the NDP will shortly propose a new decentralization law giving more authority to local governments. This created fears in the ruling party that another political force, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, could use these new prerogatives to expand its political capacity. This fear is unrealistic; however, consider the enormous power that presidentially-appointed provincial governors will continue to exercise over local administration.

Although there is actually little power being contested in the local elections, the prevailing political climate has added some spice to the campaign, revealing the fierce struggle between the Brotherhood and the regime, each determined to show its strength in facing down its opponent. The Brotherhood for its part decided to take part in the elections in order to challenge the constitutional amendment that bans any political activity based on religion. Meanwhile, the regime decided to punish the Brotherhood using all legal and security means—including the arrest of as many as one thousand members—in order to deny it political gains.

Apart from this ongoing struggle between the regime and the Brotherhood, there are other discouraging aspects of the local elections so far. Very few women and Coptic Christian candidates are participating. The judiciary, whose role was diminished in the constitutional amendments, is playing far less of an oversight role than it has in the past. And there is much less coordination between the Brotherhood and other opposition groups, compared to what happened during the 2005 legislative elections. In short, instead of being a step forward toward consolidating the values of political participation and competition, the local elections represent a step backwards and raise serious questions about where Egypt is headed.

Khalil al-Anani is an Egyptian scholar specializing in democratic affairs and political Islam. He recently published Al-Ikhwan al-muslimin fi misr: al-shaykhshukha tusaari' al-zaman (The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt: A Gerontocracy Fighting the Clock) (Dar al-Shurouq al-Dawliya, 2007). Paul Wulfsberg translated this article from Arabic.