



## Egypt: A Post-Electoral Assessment

### *Speakers*

- **Dr. Michele Dunne**, Visiting Assistant Professor, Georgetown University
- **Dr. Amr Hamzawy**, Senior Associate, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
- **Dr. Abdel Monem Said Aly**, Director, Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies
- **Dr. Emad Shahin**, Visiting Professor, Georgetown University and Professor, American University in Cairo

### *Moderator*

- **Dr. Michael Hudson**, Director, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University

On 12 September 2005, the United States-Egypt Friendship Society (USEF), in partnership with the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies (CCAS) at Georgetown University, hosted a seminar on Egypt's first-ever contested presidential election.

**Dr. Michael Hudson** Director, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, opened the symposium, noting that observers see the November parliamentary elections as likely to be the real indicator of whether Egypt embraces political reform.

**Dr. Abdel Monem Said Aly** began by acknowledging his role on the reform committee of the National Democratic Party, the party of President Mubarak, and his support for the party, while adding that his support does not necessarily extend to all of its positions.

Dr. Said Aly looked at the election from two perspectives. Compared to other countries, Egypt fared poorly given its low turnout and the presence of some irregularities. Compared to previous Egyptian elections, however, it was an improvement because the election was not rigged and voting for opposition candidates was possible. Irregularities were sporadic and localized, rather than pervasive and centrally organized.

He emphasized four important outcomes from the election. First, domestic affairs have returned to the forefront of political debate. Second, criticism of President Mubarak has humanized the President and “de-Pharaohnized” the office. Third, a new generation of politicians has emerged. Fourth, Egypt's political future will depend on the direction of constitutional change and the Muslim Brotherhood's next steps.

**Dr. Amr Hamzawy** asserted that Egypt is in the midst of an unprecedented period of political dynamism that is creating a major shift towards increased democracy. This is made apparent by new protest movements and broader political involvement that will



influence future reforms. However, the political system continues to reinforce stasis because there are so few checks on the power of the ruling party.

Dr. Hamzawy believes that the impact of the election will be minimal given its low turnout and its limited legitimacy. If real political change is to occur, then a national dialogue that includes major opposition parties and reaches a consensus on reform and strategy, will be necessary, rather than a Government-led process that simply assimilates opposition ideas into the ruling party's strategy.

**Dr. Michele Dunne** focused on two issues: the long-term implications of the election and U.S. policy toward Egypt. First, she noted that amended Article 76 of the Constitution has changed the process of presidential succession. The fact that the National Democratic Party may choose a candidate only from its senior ranks makes the pool of possible contenders small, and increases the likelihood that the next president will be a civilian.

Regarding U.S. policy, she noted that the White House and State Department statements on the September 7 presidential election combined some praise with direct and indirect criticism of flaws in the process and expectations of improvements before upcoming parliamentary elections. The U.S. will probably press in particular for independent election observers.

**Dr. Emad Shahin** argued that the results of the presidential elections have altered the form but not the substance of Egyptian political dynamics. He warned that if the current regime orientation and practices continue, it would be difficult for opposition parties to make any significant gains in the parliamentary elections. He added that the regime succeeded in promoting a reformist image without making significant concessions. The opposition appeared divided and failed to back an opposition candidate or reverse the regime's agenda. He agreed with Dr. Hamzawy that the process enriched political dynamism in Egypt.

Dr. Shahin explored three possible scenarios leading to the parliamentary elections: (1) status quo authoritarianism by the regime; (2) increased opposition pressure with a concession to allow election monitoring; or (3) genuine top-down reform, which is the least likely outcome.

### ***Q&A Highlights***

**Ambassador Nicholas Veliotes**, Chairman of USEF's Advisory Committee and former U.S. Ambassador to Egypt, began the Q&A period by asking two questions: (1) How would the outcome of the elections have been different had observers been allowed? (2) How will the US government's desire to open the political arena in Egypt affect the Muslim Brotherhood?



**Dr. Shahin:** The presence of monitors would have made a difference when it comes to validating the election outcomes. The Muslim Brotherhood is now very much a reformed group that is learning through the process and can function in coalitions – it is a viable political entity not a fringe group.

**Dr. Hamzawy:** It would have been important to have monitors as they would have provided credible reports about the irregularities. The idea of the Muslim brotherhood taking over is hypothetical. We always say “what if?” I doubt that their influence is as great as some observers believe. The fact that the Brotherhood encouraged voting for opposition but the turnout was still very low constituted an indicator that their influence is limited.

**Dr. Said Aly:** I doubt that it would have made a difference having monitors. The problem is the constitution, which needs change. As far as the Muslim Brotherhood is concerned, Egypt is a country with civic parties; an Islamic state is not part of the Egyptian polity. Two types of evolution are needed: a state evolution that removes the category of “enemies of the state” and the evolution of the Muslim Brotherhood into a more civic organization.

**Dr. Walid Abdelnasser,** Deputy Chief of Mission, Embassy of Egypt, was invited to make a brief statement. He noted that the level of participation in the 2005 presidential elections, though low in absolute terms, was still higher than that in the 2000 parliamentary elections. Presidential candidates as well as Judges opposed the presence of foreign observers, but domestic observers were allowed in the balloting stations on election day. Many Egyptian NGOs published reports about the elections, but none proved that irregularities or violations were anything other than limited and sporadic, as opposed to reflecting a systematic policy. The National Council for Human Rights in Egypt will soon publish a comprehensive report on the elections. The comments by speakers and attendees regarding voter apathy may be partly true, but this indicates a need for concerted efforts by all political parties and civil society organizations; it cannot be addressed by the Government or the ruling National Democratic Party alone. Individuals who support Islamist trends or groups have the right to run in their individual capacity or under the banner of legitimate political parties, but establishing parties on religious basis remains prohibited by the Egyptian Constitution. He agreed with those who cited Egypt’s long and complex political history, including its first constitution in the 1860s, the break in the multi-party system between 1953 and 1976, and fluctuations in openness between 1976 and 1982; therefore, he argued, the democratic process should be left to naturally grow and develop. The United States has realized over time that the optimal way to deal with the question of reform in Egypt is through dialogue among friends and not through critical public statements that lead to counterproductive results.

**Q:** Many people went to the voting booths and did not have voting cards. They weren’t issued on time and these people could not vote. How does that fit into the larger significance of low voter turnout?



**Dr. Dunne:** I find it a good sign that the low voter turnout is announced by the regime. In the past, low turnout was ignored and never mentioned, just the percentage results.

**Q:** Those of us who read the *Washington Post* saw a description of the election as a sham. What do you think of this?

**Dr. Said Aly:** I understand the characterization of the election as a “fraud” by the *Washington Post* because of the context. However, they ignored the fact that these elections were very serious. It was a serious process and everyone who was involved in it was serious. The problem with Egypt is the constitution.

**Dr. Shahin:** For the parliamentary elections, there should be observers. However for now, there is an increased level of tolerance to dissent. The expatriate community should press its demands for the parliamentary elections to ensure voting rights are extended to expatriates.