

Waging Peace

Egypt's Parliamentary Election

IN A DEC. 7 panel organized by the United States-Egypt Friendship Society (USEF), and held at the Carnegie Endowment for International Democracy in Washington, DC, Ambassador Nicholas Veliotes, chairman of USEF, asked Drs. Nathan Brown and Amr Hamzawy, both senior associates at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, to discuss the two camps which have formed in response to Egypt's recent parliamentary elections. Were the elections, which took place between Nov. 9 and Dec. 7, too imperfect to be considered valid, or can the inclusion of diverse political parties, however limited, be seen as a first step toward reform within the government?

Brown began by commenting on the "extremely centralized political order" of Egypt, which is tightly controlled by President Hosni Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP). "I don't want to suggest that the recent election changed that structure," he said, but he described it as "challenged...and forced to operate in a different way."

Since the 1980s, Brown explained, the judicial branch of the government has been working to limit the powers of the executive branch so that more open elections can occur. Because the Egyptian constitution allows all citizens to run for office, Brown noted, initial reforms removed an unconstitutional requirement that candidates run under an established political party. Another key element of these reforms, he added, was increasing judicial supervision of elections so that they are "operated in a much more public view" and therefore harder to manipulate.

The election reforms helped the Muslim Brotherhood gain 20 percent of the legislature—88 of 444 seats. However, commented Hamzawy, the NDP, which maintained a two-thirds majority, "can still control parliament and pass the legislation which it intends to pass."

Even so, Brown argued, these changes "create a protected space" for discussion. Other political parties, he stated, will be able to "question [the NDP], propose laws...[and] force public debate over issues [the Muslim Brotherhood] wants raised."

Describing the parliament's post-election structure, Hamzawy said it is "emerging around two blocks, the NDP and the Muslim Brotherhood...we don't have center parties." He attributed part of the Brotherhood's success to their policy of "self-limiting strategies." By concentrating on political issues, rather than religious ones, and by nominating only one-third of possible candidates, Hamzawy said, the Brotherhood was able to present itself in a manner which did not threaten the



Dr. Amr Hamzawy (l) and Dr. Nathan Brown discuss results of Egypt's parliamentary elections (Staff photo E. Weedon).

NDP. And, he added, with its broad religious base, “the Muslim Brotherhood can develop movements outside political spheres.” In contrast, the inability of secular, centrist parties—which he equated to urban, intellectual “debating clubs”—to organize large constituencies helped lead to their marginalization.

Hamzawy outlined three possibilities for the future of Egyptian politics. The first is that the NDP will target the Muslim Brotherhood or even “dissolve the parliament” in an effort to maintain its political domination. When asked, Brown conceded his belief that the Egyptian government will most likely follow a form of this option. The other possibilities Hamzawy offered are that the NDP might attempt to integrate the Muslim Brotherhood into the existing government, or pursue what Hamzawy termed “cautious accommodation,” in which the NDP and Muslim Brotherhood would reach broad agreements on political reform but little else.

In closing, Brown reiterated that “something potentially important happened...[the NDP’s] hold has been loosened a little bit.”

USEF can be contacted through the Kenan Institute Washington Center at (202) 408-8542. Further information on Drs. Brown and Hamzawy, including their recently published article, “Can Egypt’s Troubled Elections Produce a More Democratic Future?” is available at www.carnegieendowment.org.

—Emily Weedon