



Assessing the Pre-election Political Environment in Egypt

November 27, 2010

On Sunday, November 28, Egypt will hold its elections for the People's Assembly, the lower house of the Egyptian parliament. These elections have drawn widespread attention, including from the U.S. administration, which has repeatedly stated its desire to see free, fair, and transparent elections in Egypt. The White House press readout following a meeting between President Obama and President Mubarak on September 1 stated that "President Obama reaffirmed the importance of a vibrant civil society, open political competition, and credible and transparent elections in Egypt."¹ This message has since been repeated in Cairo by administration officials including Assistant Secretary of State Jeffrey Feltman, Assistant Secretary of State Michael Posner, and U.S. Ambassador to Egypt Margaret Scobey.²

In a statement on November 15, Assistant Secretary Joseph Crowley gave the administration's most precise articulation of what credible and transparent elections in Egypt would look like:

"In keeping with the Egyptian government's commitment, fair and transparent elections would include peaceful political assemblies throughout the campaign, civil society organizations freely promoting voter education and participation, and an open media environment that offers balanced coverage for all candidates. In addition, an open electoral process would include a credible and impartial mechanism for reviewing election-related complaints, a domestic election observation effort according to international standards, and the presence of international observers."³

This statement can be broken down into six measurable criteria for assessing Egypt's parliamentary elections:

¹ ["Readout of President Obama's Meeting with President Mubarak of Egypt,"](#) The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, September 1, 2010.

² ["Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey D. Feltman Press Roundtable with Senior Editors,"](#) October 14, 2010; ["Michael Posner, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Rights, and Labor Press Roundtable, U.S. Embassy, Cairo, Egypt,"](#) October 9, 2010; ["Statement by U.S. Ambassador Margaret Scobey on Egyptian Elections,"](#) November 21, 2010, Embassy of the United States – Egypt.

³ ["Daily Press Briefing,"](#) Assistant Secretary Philip J. Crowley, U.S. Department of State, November 15, 2010.

1. Peaceful political assemblies throughout the campaign.
2. Civil society organizations freely promoting voter education and participation.
3. An open media environment that offers balanced coverage for all candidates.
4. A credible and impartial mechanism for reviewing election-related complaints.
5. A domestic election observation effort according to international standards.
6. The presence of international observers.

Following is a brief discussion of the political environment in Egypt with respect to these six criteria:

I. Peaceful political assemblies throughout the campaign

Nearly every day of the campaign period was marked by political assemblies that did not remain peaceful, with frequent violence between government security forces and candidate supporters. The campaign period kicked off with violent clashes⁴ and reports of security forces beating opposition candidates and their supporters.⁵ Even before the campaign period officially began, the pre-election period was marked by near-daily reports of arrests and violence.⁶ More than 1,200 political activists have been arrested during the pre-election period, including more than 700 members of the Muslim Brotherhood who now await trial.⁷ Although Alexandria and Cairo have seen the most incidents, there have been arrests of candidate supporters and political activists documented in nearly all of Egypt's 29 governorates.⁸ In addition, another tool widely used to organize political assembly in Egypt – mass text messaging – was severely restricted by the government in October, in a move widely seen as targeting political opposition groups such as Mohamed ElBaradei's National Association for Change, the April 6 Youth Movement, and the Muslim Brotherhood.⁹ To summarize, these parliamentary elections have fallen far short of being marked by "peaceful political assemblies throughout the campaign."

II. Civil society organizations freely promoting voter education and participation

Government interference has not been limited to candidates for parliamentary seats, as civil society organizations have also been subject to intimidation and increasing restrictions on their work. In October, the Egyptian press reported a new Ministry of Social Solidarity decree restricting the activities of employees of nongovernmental organizations, including a prohibition on discussions of a

⁴ "[Parliamentary electoral campaigning kicks off amid violence](#)," *Al Masry Al Youm*, November 16, 2010.

⁵ "[Security Forces Attack Candidate and a Number of his Female Supporters in Alexandria](#)," *Al Dostor*, November 16, 2010.

⁶ For example, "[The Return of Thuggery and Violence to the 2010 Elections](#)," *Al Shorouk*, September 30, 2010. Also "[Brotherhood supporters in Alexandria say beaten by police](#)," Daily News Egypt, October 9, 2010.

⁷ "[Egypt cracks down on Muslim Brotherhood ahead of elections](#)," Dan Murphy, *Christian Science Monitor*, November 24, 2010.

⁸ "[The Legislative Elections 2010: The Third Report](#)," Egyptian Association for Community Participation Enhancement (EACPE) and Nazra for Feminist Studies, November 2010.

⁹ "[Critics say new text-messaging rules target pre-election political opposition](#)," *Al Masry Al Youm*, October 14, 2010.

political nature.¹⁰ Such a decree is clearly contrary to the ability of civil society organizations to “freely promote” voter education and electoral participation. This followed the government’s closure of a conference on freedom of association, organized by the Egyptian NGO, the One World Foundation, in conjunction with Freedom House.¹¹ In addition, an alarming development in Egyptian universities helped set the stage for the pre-election period. In September, universities were reportedly given strict instructions to expel any students involved in collecting signatures for Mohamed ElBaradei’s statement demanding a set of seven political reforms.¹² Longtime Egyptian activists noted that the government had never before used universities as tools of political repression in this manner – while security services had long targeted political activists on university campuses, universities themselves punishing students for political participation was seen as a new development. Numerous members of the April 6 Youth Movement were frequently been arrested for distributing flyers containing information about the elections.¹³ In addition, supporters of Mohamed ElBaradei and his petition demanding reforms found themselves the target of increasing government pressure through various means during this period.¹⁴

III. An open media environment that offers balanced coverage for all candidates

While the development of a more open media environment has been frequently cited as a key area of political progress in Egypt over the past decade, the Egyptian government unfortunately aimed to reverse much of this progress during the pre-election period. In September, the popular television talk show “Cairo Today” was taken off the air. On October 4, prominent newspaper editor Ibrahim Eissa of *Al-Dostor* was fired, allegedly because he refused to remove from the newspaper an article written by Mohamed ElBaradei. Twelve private television stations were shut down on grounds of “inciting religious hatred,” with warnings issued to 20 other stations, while a number of stations were forced to move their live broadcast units to state-run facilities.¹⁵ Numerous journalists were arrested for apparently political reasons.¹⁶ Egyptian activists observed the impact of this government crackdown on media, noting an increase in self-censorship as television talk shows avoided political topics and discussion of the elections, while independent newspapers devoted far less space to the

¹⁰ [“Al-Youm Al-Saba’a Publishes Exclusive – New Solidarity \[Ministry\] Decree on Workers in Associations, Forbidding Workers from Participating in Religious or Political Discussions, and Allowing Employees to Receive Annual Bonuses of 7% without an Upper Limit,”](#) *Al Youm Al Saba’a*, October 21, 2010.

¹¹ [“Egyptian Security Forces Shut Down Freedom of Association Conference,”](#) Freedom House press release, September 24, 2010.

¹² [“Sources: Universities Instructed to Expel Students Gathering Signatures for ElBaradei petition,”](#) *Al Dostor*, September 27, 2010.

¹³ [“Egypt Urged to Release or Charge Opposition Activists after New Wave of Arrests,”](#) Amnesty International press release, October 27, 2010.

¹⁴ [“Pro-Elbaradei Campaign in Alexandria Continues Gathering Signatures after Security Forces Assault on Their Members,”](#) *Al Dostor*, November 12, 2010. Also, [“Arrest of Safwan, First Representative of ElBaradei, in Alexandria,”](#) *Al Shorouk*, November 5, 2010.

¹⁵ [“Egypt suspends 12 satellite TV channels for ‘inciting religious hatred,’”](#) *Al Masry Al Youm*, October 19, 2010.

¹⁶ [“Journalist arrested as payback for articles alleging police brutality, say activists,”](#) *Daily News Egypt*, November 21, 2010. Also [“Detention of Ikhwan Online Editor During Return from Yemen,”](#) *Al Shorouk*, November 1, 2010, and [“Pro-ElBaradei journalist faces criminal trial over minister ‘insult,’”](#) *Al Masry Al Youm*, September 6, 2010.

elections than they did during the same period in 2005.¹⁷ In all, it is clear that Egypt's elections are not taking place under an "open media environment." As far as offering "balanced coverage for all candidates," it appears that this too is far from the case. A report by the Independent Coalition for Elections' Observation, which conducted a European Commission-funded study of the media environment during the pre-election period, found a "conclusive bias" toward the NDP party in terms of the amount of coverage in various media outlets and the nature of that coverage.¹⁸

IV. A credible and impartial mechanism for reviewing election-related complaints

Regarding the reviewing of election-related complaints, on one hand, the Egyptian courts do appear to retain some credibility as being impartial in reviewing such complaints. But on the other hand, the courts are not seen as having the authority and freedom needed to properly to play this role. When courts have ruled in favor of opposition candidates or plaintiffs, other branches of the Egyptian government appear to have ignored those decisions. In a written statement, Anwar Esmat Sadat, son of the late President Sadat, declares that an administrative court upheld his claim to run for the seat in the Menoufia governorate that he currently holds, which is designated for a farmer or laborer. This court decision, however, appears to have been ignored by the High Election Commission (HEC) and the Ministry of Interior and his name is not expected to appear on the ballot as the court decision requires.¹⁹ Similarly, several Muslim Brotherhood candidates that were disqualified by the government during the candidate registration period technically had their registration reinstated by courts, but the expectation is that their names will still fail to appear on the ballots.²⁰ On Thursday, November 25, administrative courts ruled to cancel parliamentary voting in 24 districts after court orders to reinstate opposition and independent candidates were ignored. However, the expectation is that this ruling will equally be ignored by the Ministry of Interior, and that voting will proceed in those districts with the exclusion of the court-reinstated candidates.²¹

V. A domestic election observation effort according to international standards

Egypt's presidential and parliamentary elections in 2005 were the first in which domestic civil society organizations were permitted to conduct election observation efforts. While this was seen an important step forward in terms of setting a precedent for election observers in the country, there was to some degree a lack of properly trained and equipped observers and the Egyptian election observation organizations were limited in their capacity. Since that time, there has been a serious investment in resources and training to equip Egyptian organizations to conduct election observation efforts that meet international standards. Today, hundreds of Egyptian NGOs are aiming to

¹⁷ ["Free media under siege on eve of Egypt's elections,"](#) Bahey eldin Hassan, *Foreign Policy Middle East Channel*, November 26, 2010.

¹⁸ ["Interior Ministry and High Elections Commission's refusal to implement court orders threaten to nullify the parliamentary elections,"](#) Independent Coalition for Elections Observation, November 27, 2010.

¹⁹ ["Statement of Protest and Denunciation Regarding the Tricks of the Government,"](#) Anwar Esmat Sadat, November 22, 2010.

²⁰ ["Egypt cracks down on Muslim Brotherhood ahead of elections,"](#) Dan Murphy, *Christian Science Monitor*, November 24, 2010.

²¹ ["Egypt courts cancel election in several districts,"](#) *Al Masry Al Youm*, November 26, 2010. Also ["Fate of Alexandria PA elections hangs in the balance,"](#) *Daily News Egypt*, November 25, 2010.

undertake election observation or monitoring efforts in one form or another. The most prominent of these include the Egyptian Association for Supporting Democratic Development (EASD), which has received extensive training and support from USAID, as well as the Egyptian Association for Community Participation Enhancement (EACPE), which has received extensive support from the European Commission, and the Egyptian Organization of Human Rights (EOHR). Each of these groups has more than one thousand trained election monitors available, and each has the experience of monitoring several previous elections in Egypt.

Unfortunately, the Egyptian government has not been facilitating an environment in which these trained observers can properly perform their duties. On November 22, less than a week ahead of the elections, the chairman of the High Elections Commission (HEC) al-Sayed Abdel Aziz gave ambiguous and unsettling remarks in which he asserted that there would be “no monitoring” of the elections, as civil society organizations would be limited to “following” the elections.²² The distinction was not entirely clear, but Abdel Aziz’s comments raised concerns among election observers that even those observers who receive permits would not be given the access to polling stations needed to properly carry out their mission. These recent comments compounded existing fears based on the wording of HEC Resolution 53, which includes the regulations governing election monitoring, and suggests that local election staff have the discretion to deny even accredited observers entry to polling stations or expel them once they have entered.²³

As of Saturday, November 27, most of the independent groups that have properly trained election observers have not received close to the number of permits or badges they had requested for observers. The Egyptian Association for Community Participation Enhancement (EACPE) was told on Thursday, November 25 that they would not be given permission to act as election observers at all “for security reasons.”²⁴ The Nazra Center for Feminist Studies and the Ibn Khaldun Center are among other organizations that had applied for election observer permits but are receiving none. It appears that the Egyptian Association for Supporting Democratic Development (EASD) is receiving far more permits than any other independent organization. As of the evening of Saturday, November 27, it appears that EASD will be granted approximately 60% of the permits for which it had applied, which would be more than 2,000 permits.

Despite the fact that very few independent organizations received the requested number of permits, the government has reportedly issued a relatively large total of approximately 6,000 permits. This suggests that large numbers of election observation permits may be given to organizations that lack the capacity for proper election observation and are likely to be so-called GONGOs, or ‘government-organized-NGOs,’ that intend to issue favorable statements on the elections rather than conducting objective assessments of the elections. Such organizations may include *Sahebet el Galala*, *Al Nakib*,

²² [“HEC: Civil society has right to ‘follow’ – not ‘monitor’ – elections.”](#) Al Masry Al Youm, November 22, 2010.

²³ [Egypt Elections Newsletter: Issue 3](#), National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), November 27, 2010.

²⁴ [“The Supreme Committee for Elections refuses issuing monitoring permissions to EACPE for security reasons,”](#) Egyptian Association for Community Participation Enhancement, November 25, 2010.

and *Al Maet*, all of whom lack credibility with independent Egyptian human rights organizations and are widely viewed as close to the government and the internal security services. The lack of government cooperation with most independent observation groups may heighten the importance of efforts to use online technology to make observations and keep a record without the traditional access requiring government cooperation. Two of the leading websites for this approach are <http://u-shahid.org/live/> and <http://shahid2010.com/index.php>, though it remains to be seen to what degree the government may attempt to interfere with these online sites.

VI. The presence of international observers

The Egyptian government has consistently rejected calls for international election observers. For a short time, Egyptian government spokesmen suggested that they may allow some sort of limited, or “partial” international observation, but more recently, the government’s rhetoric about international observers became increasingly defiant and belligerent. The Egyptian foreign ministry responded to a November 18 statement repeating the administration’s call for international election observers by declaring that “The latest positions taken by the administration towards internal Egyptian affairs is something that is absolutely unacceptable.”

This view that support for democracy and for international election observers constitutes inappropriate intervention in domestic affairs leaves the Egyptian government increasingly isolated. When the Egyptian government rejected calls for international election observers in 2005, there was essentially no precedent for international election observation missions in the Arab world. At that time, many other Arab governments echoed Egypt’s position. Since 2005 however, elections have taken place under international observation in the Palestinian territories, Yemen, Morocco, Lebanon, Sudan, and Jordan. Moreover, while in 2005 the Egyptian government claimed that the Egyptian population rejected such external interference in Egyptian affairs, public opinion polling in 2009 showed that 63% of Egyptian citizens believe that “Egypt would benefit from having international observers monitor elections here.”²⁵

Summary

Although Election Day still remains, it is clear that the government of Egypt has essentially already failed to run transparent or fair elections, according to all six criteria outlined by the U.S. administration. Given the clear public statements by high-ranking officials, including President Obama himself, about the importance of “credible and transparent elections in Egypt,” the conduct of these elections appear to be a public rebuke to the U.S. administration on the part of the Egyptian government. It now remains to be seen how President Obama and the U.S. administration will respond in the wake of these elections, as observers begin to turn attention toward next year’s presidential elections.

²⁵[“World Publics Strongly Favor International Observers for Elections, Including Their Own,”](#) Program on International Policy Attitudes, University of Maryland, September 8, 2009.