



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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**“Egypt’s Upcoming Elections: Boycotts, Campaigns, and Monitors”
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
1779 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, DC
Tuesday, October 19, 1pm – 2:30pm**

On Tuesday, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in partnership with Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) hosted a discussion on preparations by opposition parties and domestic electoral monitors for the upcoming Egyptian parliamentary elections. **Mahmoud Ali Mohamed**, the director of the Egyptian Center for Development and Democratic Studies and member of the Wafd Party Supreme Council, and **Wael Nawara**, the co-founder and secretary general of the al-Ghad Party, gave presentations, POMED executive director **Andrew Albertson** delivered a response and **Michele Dunne**, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment, moderated the event.

Nawara opened his prepared remarks by providing basic context for the current parliamentary elections. Over previous decades, while much has changed on the surface the “same people and same mechanism” have remained in place, Nawara said. The Egyptian political process is a carefully scripted play in which the outcome is predetermined. Since the 2005 election, there has been an increase in social activism in Egypt. The judges, labor, and youth movements have all grown and the involvement of **Mohammed ElBaradei** has invigorated the liberal opposition. During the same period, however, the government has become more sophisticated in its ability to crackdown on the activists. **According to Nawara, the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) shrewdly crushed the liberal opposition while allowing the Muslim Brotherhood to participate. This has allowed the Mubarak regime to argue in the West that “it is either us or them.”**

Nawara then turned to the argument about the proposed election boycott. Those against the boycott say that participation is the only possible “positive action,” will expose electoral fraud, and will allow opposition parties to engage the population and train activists. Also, in their view, the boycott is unlikely to work and will simply make the government’s job easier. **Proponents of the boycott, which Nawara said he is, argue that opposition parties should not participate in what they know will be a flawed process.** Abstention will delegitimize the outcome and regardless of how many seats the opposition wins, the parliament itself is basically just a rubber stamp for the Mubarak regime. To be clear, Nawara said, the boycotting parties are not advocating for complete inaction and plan to engage in acts of civil disobedience, e.g. the formation of a parallel parliament.

Both sides face one significant question: what should they do the day after the election? For those that boycott, two key issues will be restoring trust among the opposition parties and making sure that social activism translates into campaigns that actually have the power to change political institutions. The parties that participate, on the other hand, face other challenges. Corruption and vote buying are normal, oppression by state security is widespread, and opposition parties generally face a host of “independent” challenger who are actually back by NDP.

At the end of the day, Nawara said, even if the elections are technically perfect, it would mean very little in the Egyptian context. NDP has designed a system where even if the opposition wins seats in parliament, any attempts to play a real role in the political process will be stymied.

Nawara feels that the Obama administration has yet to settle on a strong strategy for how to deal with Egypt. “We have to be confident that there are alternatives,” to NDP and the Muslim Brotherhood he said, adding that U.S. can use positive incentives to motivate Egypt to open its political process. Seeking stability through the Mubarak regime is not in the U.S.’s long-term interest.

In his remarks, **Mohamed** described the challenges facing domestic electoral monitors in Egypt. Election monitoring is not new to Egypt, he said. During the 2005 election, local monitors played an active role in the election. Since then, civil society organizations have exerted pressure on the government to expand election monitoring efforts and ostensibly the government has obliged; the process surrounding domestic monitoring efforts has improved significantly. The issue, however, will be implementation. For example, it is unlikely that more than 10% of the election monitors who apply for government credentials will receive them. According to Mohamed, the Egyptian government must also amend the law to codify the rights of electoral monitors to enter and inspect polling places.

Egyptian election monitors face two significant challenges, Mohamed said. First, there is very little information about the registration process, where the polling places will be located, and a host of other important issues. Second, cooperation between the high electoral commission and civil society remains problematic. **According to the law, election officials must cooperate with local election monitors, but thus far they have not been forthcoming.** For example, it is very likely that of the thousands of electoral monitoring permits civil society organizations have applied for, only a few hundred will be filled and those that are will probably only be approved hours prior to the election. Moreover, police oppression is still a huge issue. This year, registration will take place in police stations and it is highly likely that those election monitors attempting to observe the process will be rebuffed, have their equipment confiscated, or worse.

In his response, **Albertson** made two points: First, we must look at the Egyptian parliamentary election in the regional context. This fall, Jordan and Bahrain are also holding elections. **What we see when we look at these three countries is that authoritarian regimes are using an ever evolving arsenal of weapons to clamp down on freedom of association and information before elections.** Interestingly, we also see that some countries in the region have been more open to international election monitors than others. Lebanon, Jordan, and Sudan for example, have opened their doors to international monitors, while Egypt and Bahrain have refused.

Second, Albertson said that “we need to crush the myth about Egyptian non-participation.” If we put ourselves in the Egyptians shoes, we begin to see how hard participation is. Alternative voices have largely been eliminated, there is little information about candidates or their platforms and voters must go to police stations to register, a highly unpleasant experience by any measure. Far too often U.S. officials excuse the behavior of the Mubarak regime by saying that the Egyptian population has some sort of innate aversion to political participation.

Dunne then opened the floor for questions. The first questioner asked how Mohamed felt about international election monitors and if he ever consults with international organizations. Mohamed responded that he believes international monitors could play an important role in the election, first by providing the world with a clear picture of the political environment in Egypt, second by giving support to domestic monitors, and finally by making it harder for the Egyptian government to rig the

elections. **There has been some discussion in the government about allowing some sort of low level election monitoring like in 2005 when representatives from embassies and international NGOs were allowed to visit polling places briefly.** Mohamed added that international monitoring organizations have provided excellent training for Egyptians monitoring NGOs. Today Mohamed's election monitoring alliance has over 12,000 monitors prepared to observe the election.

Another questioner asked Nawara what he thought the Obama administration should do to motivate Egypt to change. **Nawara responded that the U.S. must develop a package of positive incentives for the Egyptian government including partnerships and special trade agreements that are predicated on political reforms.** According to Nawara, this deal would be similar to Turkey's EU accession process.

Next, an audience member asked where the line was between helpful international assistance and meddling in Egypt's internal politics. Mohamed responded that while he clearly supports Egypt's sovereignty, free and fair elections are an international norm and thus when the international community works to promote them in Egypt, it does not constitute meddling, as some in the Egyptian government argue.

In closing, Albertson said that it is important to remember that elections are fundamentally about accountability and the Egyptian government has failed to be accountable to its citizens. The Mubarak regime has not brought about development and Egyptians want real change. The question for the international community is how to play a role in this process. **"We can't stand on the sidelines," Albertson said, adding that we must stand up and declare what we care about and what we stand for.** Dunne added that how the U.S. handles the parliamentary election will almost certainly have implications for next year's presidential election and ultimately the transfer of presidential power, however that occurs.