

BULLETIN

No. 107 (324) • November 29, 2011 • © PISM

Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief), Joanna Troszczyńska (Executive Editor),

Jarosław Ćwiek-Karpowicz, Beata Górka-Winter, Artur Gradziuk,

Leszek Jesień, Beata Wojna

Political Forces and Parliamentary Elections in Egypt

Patrycja Sasnal

More than nine months after the fall of President Hosni Mubarak, the speed of transformation in Egypt has stalled. Egyptian society has once again embarked upon a path of confrontation with the authorities—this time with the Supreme Council of Armed Forces. The army aims at safeguarding its economic privileges and broadening its political prerogatives in new constitutional regulations. Religious political parties are gaining popularity (although not the Muslim Brotherhood itself), while the secular ones (liberal and leftist) are losing ground. The parliamentary elections of 28 November initiated a complicated process of selecting a new leadership, a process that will be completed in the spring of 2012 at the earliest.

Draft Constitutional Changes. The fragmentation of political forces, sectarian tensions, a staggering economy and growing social dissatisfaction are slowing down transformations in Egypt. In the views of the Egyptian society, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) has failed to keep the promises given at the time of power transfer after the fall of Mubarak last February; the emergency legislation has not been revoked either and the procedure of holding civilian trials in military courts has not been dropped.

The SCAF, composed of twenty high-ranking army officers headed by Field Marshal Muhammad Husain Tantaawi, is determined to prevent any deterioration of the army's status. Before handing power over to civilian authorities, it wants to secure its economic interests (according to estimates, the army might be in control of up to 40% of the Egyptian economy) and instill its constitutional position. Among the direct causes of the recent protests in Cairo was a decision to inscribe a provision in a document outlining the constitutional regulations that would allow the military budget to be submitted to Parliament and voted as a single item (in essence curbing considerably civilian control over the military). Islamists and conservatives were further angered by a proposal to nominate 80% of the members of the future constitutional council from among candidates outside Parliament, i.e. representatives of labour unions, religious denominations, business chambers, human rights organisations, the police, judges, farmers and other social groups. Such a composition of the council would not parallel the distribution of forces in Parliament, so it would limit the impact of religious groups on the draft constitution. Moreover, the SCAF would be able to introduce its own changes into the draft as well as dismiss the constitutional council and appoint a new one if it failed to agree on a new constitution within the time frame of six months.

Parliamentary Elections. In line with the regulations, elections to the lower chamber of Parliament will be held in three stages, depending on the province (28 November, 14 December and 3 January 2012). A run-off is planned for each stage. Elections to the upper chamber will be held on 29 January and 4 March 2012. The new parliament will convene on 17 March and nominate a 100-member constitutional council that is to submit a draft constitution for a referendum within six months.

The long and complicated electoral process makes it susceptible to political influences by the current authorities, especially the army. Instigating local clashes would suffice to interrupt or cancel the entire process. The timing of the elections has been debated since February: the strongest parties, mainly religious ones, want early elections so as not to lose support, while the smaller ones need more time to prepare and would like them to be held later.

Political Forces. According to a survey conducted in October by the Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies and the Danish-Egyptian Dialogue Institute, the conservative Freedom and Justice Party (*Al-Hurriyya wal-'Adala*—F&J) established by the Muslim Brotherhood is ahead in the polls, with nearly 36% backing. The F&J is declaring support for a civilian-run state as opposed to a military-run one or a theocracy, also stipulating that the High Constitutional Court should examine the conformity of draft new legislation with Muslim law.

Over the past few months, however, the F&J has been losing support in favour of more radical Islamic parties. An-Nuur (The Light), which is calling for subjecting the right of expression to the *shari'a*, has scored almost 9% in the polls. Furthermore, cracks have begun to appear within the Brotherhood: some of the more liberal members who did not make it to the F&J leadership have set up their own parties, i.e. the centrist Al-Wasat Party.

The second most popular party (26%) is the liberal Al-Wafd (Delegation), which calls for a secular state, a division of power, a market economy and social justice. The F&J and Al-Wafd have formed an electoral bloc (Democratic Alliance), which will most likely have the majority of seats in the future Parliament. A weaker bloc consists mostly of leftist parties (Progressive Party *Tagammu'*) and liberal ones (Free Egyptians Party).

According to polls, smaller parties are gaining popularity. One of the non-ideological “third way” parties—Justice (*Al-'Adl*) set up by a well-known blogger Mustafa Naggar, scores more than 5% in the polls. It is supposed to counterbalance the Islamists and liberals. Some members of Hosni Mubarak's delegalised National Democratic Party (NDP)—most of them can run in the elections—have established a few smaller parties. The biggest one among them (support over 4%) is the Unity Party (*Al-Ittihad*) founded by the last secretary general of the NDP, Husam Badrawi. At the same time, more than 50% of respondents remain undecided and do not know at this stage which formation they will support.

Conclusions and Recommendations. The recent unrest on the streets of Cairo confirms the effectiveness of social pressure on the government. Several days of large-scale protests were sufficient to safeguard the resignation of the Assam Sharaf government and the SCAF's decision to move the presidential elections from 2013 to July 2012. On the other hand, the ease with which the army decides on issues crucial for the country does not bode well. Even though the protesters turned down the army's offer of concessions, the demonstrations are likely to wind down once Marshal Tantaawi quits and hands power over to a government of technocrats. Tantaawi himself can be replaced by the chief of staff, Sami 'Anaan, or another more respected general.

Egypt's political scene is getting more and more fragmented. Due to their conciliatory stance towards the army over the past months, the biggest parties—F&J and Wafd—are losing support in favour of the more conservative religious parties on the one hand, and smaller liberal ones on the other, although they are still likely to emerge from the elections with the highest number of seats.

The state of Egypt's economy also plays a role as far as political sentiments are concerned. Liberalisation plans will be slowed down by such economic problems as lack of fluidity, withdrawal of financial reserves and growing unemployment, especially painful to young Egyptians. Economic policies could then be centralised further and become susceptible to populist demands.

Egypt has entered a new stage of destabilisation stemming from disillusionment with changes. This trend will embolden the smaller parties, especially the religious ones more conservative than the F&J that have no ties with the former regime. So the European Union should welcome an election result good for the F&J and, as long as the electoral process goes on unobstructed, confine its political reaction to that alone. At the same time, the Union should focus on building a civil society and supporting the economy. Political stabilisation and democratisation will not go forward without giving a boost to the Egyptian youth, who do not want to engage in political processes with a view to remaining independent reviewers of the changes. Hence the largest share of the European offer, also within the European Endowment for Democracy, should be addressed to young Egyptians. In the new situation it is unclear which steps will turn out to be efficient, so it is only rational to multiply the initiatives aimed at forging closer relations between the civil societies of Europe and Egypt, especially among the young people. Despite its limited resources, the EU should consider coordinated debt relief, greater access to European markets for Egyptian products and promotion of European experiences in facilitating the establishment of small and medium-size enterprises.