



# To Vote or Not to Vote: Examining the Disenfranchised in Egypt's Political Landscape

## JULY 2015

In June 2014, then-interim Egyptian President Adly Mansour issued a parliamentary elections law that diminished the possibility of a dynamic, politically diverse legislature.<sup>1</sup> The structure of the parliament—120 party affiliation seats derived from majority absolute lists and 420 to individual seats—rendered it too fragmented to push for legislation unwanted by the regime or to hold the government accountable.<sup>2</sup> The focus on individual seats quashed aspirations to build party platform campaigns focused on debating ideological differences rather than ones in which parties sought to lure voters with promises of services and favors. The system also favored the major parties with their superior financial and canvassing abilities. Even before several left-leaning parties—primarily the fragile ones that emerged after the 2011 uprising—announced their boycott of the elections days before candidate registrations opened, they were not expected to win enough seats to gain leverage.

The elections, originally slated for fall of 2014, were eventually postponed due to challenges over the constitutionality of some of the election law's articles. Many saw the continued postponement of the vote as an indication of the state's reluctance to relinquish legislative powers, which had been in the hands of the presidency since the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi in July 2013.<sup>3</sup> Morsi, Egypt's first democratically

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elected president following the 2011 revolution, was removed from power by then-Defense Minister Abel Fattah al-Sisi following mass protests. Since his election in June 2014, Sisi has issued over three hundred laws, amendments, and decrees, which will be reviewed by the new parliament when it reclaims legislative powers.<sup>4</sup> Several politicians close to the Sisi regime called to further delay the vote; they expressed satisfaction with the Constitutional Court's ruling on March 1 that postponed the vote when candidate registration was underway.<sup>5</sup>

Those in power seemed to view the legislature as nothing but a headache and a formality. Statements by politicians close to the regime implied that the sole benefit of electing a parliament would be finishing the transitional roadmap that Sisi announced in July 2013. The roadmap, which started with the referendum on the constitution in January 2014, was followed by the presidential elections in May 2014, which Sisi won by a landslide.

"Some people went as far as demanding the dismissal of the parliamentary elections entirely, as if the process is nothing but decorations for the liking of the world that is

Interviews for this paper were conducted in August-October 2014 and January-February 2015.

1 Scott Williamson and Nathan J. Brown, "Egypt's New Law for Parliament Sets Up a Weak Legislature," *EgyptSource* (blog), Atlantic Council, June 24, 2014, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/egyptsource/egypt-s-new-law-for-parliamentary-elections-sets-up-a-weak-legislature>.

2 Ibid.

3 Except for the period between January 2012 and June 2013, legislative powers have been in the hands of the presidency: the ruling military council, Interim President Adly Mansour, and Sisi.

4 "Does Sisi Want a Parliament?," *Mada Masr*, April 16, 2015, <http://www.madamasr.com/sections/politics/does-sisi-want-parliament>.  
5 A lawsuit filed at the state council argues that the security climate is not suitable for elections. It found support among many politicians aligned with the state. See Gamal Essam El-Din, "The Case for Delay?," *Al-Ahram*, September 11, 2014, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/7245/17/A-case-for-delay-.aspx>.

only destructive domestically . . . We should not be afraid of democracy,” said former head of the Constituent Assembly Amr Moussa in August 2014, condemning calls to change the recently approved constitution in order to give the President more powers.<sup>6</sup>

Egypt has held eight polls since 2011, five of which have been scrapped. The lower house of parliament (elected in November 2011-January 2012) was dissolved by a court order in June 2012. The upper house of parliament (elected in January-March 2012) was dissolved in July 2013, on the same day that the constitution (approved in December 2012) was suspended and President Mohamed Morsi (elected in June 2012) was ousted. The constitutional referendum, which set up the first political roadmap and was the first post-revolution vote (March 2011), was thus rendered meaningless.

Egyptians are experiencing voter fatigue; they do not see all of these elections as effectively alleviating their daily struggles. Morsi supporters, who once dominated the polls, now face public anger and exclusion from the political process. They have lost faith in the credibility and durability of the electoral process. For them, revolution increasingly seems to be the only option for achieving change. Whether they are supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood or ultraconservative Salafis, the deadly security crackdown they endured left them incensed by what they feel is a vendetta that prevents their potential participation in future elections.

Electoral success still depends on the ability to oil the machines of the traditional electoral networks to physically move voters to the polling stations. This process involves field work, transportation for voters, and an extensive database of community leaders not yet available to new and small parties. The opening up of the political sphere that followed the January 25 revolution allowed for mobilizing voters through political and ideology-based campaigning.

This opening has gradually narrowed due to a number of overlapping factors. First, the law favors individual campaigning based on promising services to constituents rather than promoting the parties’ political platforms. This may seem to be a subtle distinction; political campaigning worldwide involves addressing voter interests. However, in Egypt, potential candidates traditionally address interests independently of any party platform. Second, the post-2011 parties and candidates promising to challenge the traditional political landscape have been pulling away. Finally, potential voters end up without candidates who represent their political views. Like

<sup>6</sup> Amr Moussa was close to Sisi, but his influence on decision-making was not clear. He made this statement on August 27, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/amre.moussa/posts/740138596053364> (in Arabic).

their pro-regime opponents, those voters who identify more with opposition movements believe that the parliament merely provides a façade to show the world that Egypt is on a path toward democracy.

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Groups of voters find themselves marginalized and disenfranchised from the process, whether by self-isolation or because of the perceived lack of political options. This is reflected in voter turnout numbers. Of the fifty-three million people eligible to vote, less than half showed a willingness to go to the polls in 2014. Turnout was 38 percent at the January referendum and 47.45 percent in the May presidential elections.<sup>7</sup> The 2014 numbers reflect the voting trends of the past four years, with an additional dip in turnout rates since 2013. The 2011 revolution boosted interest in politics and voting. Yet, with the exception of the 2011 parliamentary elections (54.9 percent turnout), more than half of registered voters have consistently abstained from the post-uprising elections.<sup>8</sup> There is no notable research examining whether these millions are heeding calls to boycott or if they are generally indifferent to the election process, but both scenarios bode ill for the health of Egypt’s democracy.

In a nascent democracy, voter turnout is a valuable indicator of political ownership and engagement. During the democratization waves of the 1970s and 1980s, voter turnout peaked to 80 percent in some countries.<sup>9</sup> While the Middle East saw a varied record, African states featured pronounced increases in average turnout rates before dropping to 64 percent by 2001.<sup>10</sup> More recently,

<sup>7</sup> “Official Vote Result: 98.1% Approves Egypt’s Post-June 30 Constitution,” *Ahram Online*, January 18, 2014, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/91874/Egypt/Politics-/Official-vote-result--approves-Egypt-postjune--co.aspx>. Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Voter Turnout Data for Egypt, <http://www.idea.int/vt/countryview.cfm?CountryCode=EG>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Rafael López Pintor, Maria Gratschew, and Kate Sullivan, *Voter Turnout Rates from a Comparative Perspective*, Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2002, <http://www.idea.int/publications/vt/upload/Voter%20turnout.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

while established democracies usually show a high turnout (the UK's parliamentary elections turnout in 2015 was 66 percent while that of the United States was 52 percent in 2012), countries comparable to Egypt's political situation and/or size of the population register an average over 50 percent.<sup>11</sup>

Its shortcomings notwithstanding, the country's parliament represents the most significant form of political participation and public involvement in the decision-making process. The idea that the legislature will be elected while sectors of Egyptian society, big and small, are either indifferent to or boycotting the election process should be alarming.

## Reluctant Islamist Platforms

In the build-up to the parliamentary elections, the underlying theme of political discussions in Egypt oddly resembled that of 2011: liberal and conservative parties need to form strong coalitions to face the Islamist threat. Yet, this threat is now little more than a rallying point, and does not reflect the now-weakened position of Islamist groups, which once dominated elections.

The Muslim Brotherhood was the only organized political force left in the wake of the now-disbanded National Democratic Party, the ruling party led by Hosni Mubarak for three decades until the 2011 revolution. The Islamists initially proved it in one poll after another. In 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood-led alliance won 47 percent of parliamentary seats, while an alliance of ultraconservative Salafis led by the Nour Party came in second with 25 percent.<sup>12</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood remained on the winning side following the 2012 presidential elections, but subsequent polls showed a steady decline in support for the Islamists.<sup>13</sup>

Mass protests against Morsi in June 2013, his ouster and imprisonment, as well as the security crackdown that left hundreds dead and thousands in jail,<sup>14</sup> dealt several blows to the Brotherhood's organizational and mobilization capacity. Signs of internal strife between the older leaders and the younger ones seeking a violent revo-

lutionary discourse have emerged.<sup>15</sup> Predominantly, a number of the more seasoned leaders (whether in jail or exile) officially promote a more peaceful approach while the younger members favor confrontational strategies.

The organizational structure of the Muslim Brotherhood is no longer geared toward winning elections. Its political arm, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), was dissolved by a court order on August 9, 2014, stripping it of the official platform through which it could field party candidates. If the two polls conducted thus far under the new regime are any indication, the Muslim Brotherhood's core base and its ultra-conservative Salafi supporters are boycotting the elections. The January 2014 referendum and the May 2014 presidential elections resulted overwhelmingly in favor of the roadmap drafted after the ouster of Morsi, the former FJP head.

"[Electing] a parliament will not be the turning point. The presidential elections were not the turning point. The general climate is more important," a Brotherhood member said in September 2014.<sup>16</sup> In his early thirties, he moved up in the ranks of his province where many were arrested. His assessment of the situation prioritized factors such as the public reaction to the ongoing crackdown and government failures and the regime's regional standing rather than election results. Despite affirming the solidity of the organization, he said it would be disastrous for the leadership to try to convince the base to reconcile with the government, much less participate in elections.<sup>17</sup>

Those within the Brotherhood urging a less confrontational approach with the government risk being marginalized by their peers. In August 2014, former Member of parliament Mohamed El-Omada announced the National Reconciliation Initiative upon his release from jail, calling for Morsi's release and for the temporary acknowledgement of the reality of Sisi's presidency, but not his legitimacy.<sup>18</sup> Both politicians and Morsi supporters dismissed and ridiculed the initiative. When Ragheb El-Sirgany (no relation to the author of this paper), a religious scholar respected by the Brotherhood, suggested in an article that the "unjust ruler" Muslims are required to fight should be an apostate—an argument people understood to be in favor of Sisi's leadership—he was attacked by Islamist supporters and his scholarly credentials questioned on social media.<sup>19</sup> The same hap-

11 Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Voter Turnout by Country, <http://www.idea.int/vt/countryview.cfm?id=-1>.

12 "Egypt's Islamist Parties Win Elections to Parliament," BBC, January 21, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-16665748>.

13 Compared to 13 million votes in support of Morsi, only 10.69 approved the Islamist-drafted constitution five months later. See Sarah El Sirgany, "Sacrificing Math and Facts at the Mursi Altar," *Al-Akhbar*, December 26, 2012, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/blogs/labyrinth/sacrificing-math-and-facts-mursi-altar>.

14 Amnesty International, "Generation Jail: Egypt's Youth Go from Protest to Prison," June 29, 2015, <http://www.amnestyusa.org/research/reports/generation-jail-egypt-s-youth-go-from-protest-to-prison>.

15 Sonia Farid, "Internal Conflict: Is the Muslim Brotherhood Falling apart?," *Al-Arabiya*, June 2, 2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/analysis/2015/06/02/Internal-conflict-Is-the-Muslim-Brotherhood-falling-apart.html>.

16 Interview with the author.

17 Ibid.

18 "The Details of Mohamed El-Omada's Initiative to End Political Division," *Masr Al-Arabia*, August 31, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1vYuhhg> (in Arabic).

19 Ragheb El-Sirgany, "God Knows the Unjust," *Islam Story*, September 3,



Supporters of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi chanting in the streets of Cairo in January 2014. *Photo credit: Sebastian Horndasch/Flickr.*

pened to Muslim Brotherhood leader Mahmoud Ghozlan when he emphasized a peaceful discourse for the group in an article in May 2015.<sup>20</sup>

For Brotherhood leaders to suggest the idea of electoral participation to their base—much less going through the process of convincing members and supporters—could create a backlash and discontent, all for the prospect of winning a few seats. The group knows how to circumvent legal obstacles; it has fielded its members as independent candidates since 1995. In the 2005 parliamentary elections it won eighty-eight seats, 20 percent of the parliament. This number reflected both the Mubarak regime’s relative tolerance of the then-banned group, which is not the case with the current regime, and relatively high public support at the time. Even if the group manages to overcome the current legal and political obstacles, the benefit of winning parliamentary seats would be symbolic at best, lending only a shred of legitimacy to a group designated a terrorist organization by the courts. For the

leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, venturing into the elections seems like a pointless and suicidal mission.

On the other end of the political spectrum, the Nour Party is now a stakeholder in the military-backed regime. While this new role has protected it from the crackdown and bans imposed on other Islamist groups, it has cost the party its grip on the Salafi voter base, the primary support for the party in the 2011-12 parliamentary elections. However, this base began disintegrating long before Morsi’s removal from power, proving too diverse for a sole institutional representative.

During the 2012 presidential elections, the Alexandria-based Nour Party supported former Muslim Brotherhood member Abdel Moniem Abol Fotoh, while the prominent Cairo Salafi cleric Mohamed Abdel-Maqsoud headlined the Morsi campaign. Former Nour Party President Emad Abdel-Ghaffour resigned in January 2013 and formed the Watan Party. The party joined the Brotherhood-dominated National Alliance to Support Legitimacy (also known as the Anti-Coup Alliance), established to support Morsi in his last days, but eventually left in September 2014 seeking different strategies. Popular presidential hopeful Hazem Salah Abu Ismail, now in prison, founded his own party, Al-Raya, back in

2014, <http://bit.ly/1rlcnos> (in Arabic).

<sup>20</sup> Mahmoud Ghozlan, “On The Occasion of the 87<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Founding the Group, Our Call Lives on and Our Revolution Continues,” *Egypt Window*, May 22, 2015, [http://www.egyptwindow.net/Article\\_Details.aspx?Kind=5&News\\_ID=80417](http://www.egyptwindow.net/Article_Details.aspx?Kind=5&News_ID=80417) (in Arabic).

2013. The Salafi Front, which emerged as a vocal group after the 2011 revolution, joined the Anti-Coup Alliance in 2013, proclaiming a more revolutionary strategy and rhetoric than the Salafi Call's, the religious institution out of which the Nour Party came to existence.

After July 3, 2013, the Salafi Call itself witnessed disagreements over the Nour Party's pro-military stance. A number of its religious scholars preferred silence while others vocally contradicted their leadership's position and declared support for Morsi. After the crackdown and the resulting blow to political Islam, many Salafi sheikhs reignited the pre-January 25 rejection of political participation.<sup>21</sup>

Several Nour Party leaders and members have accordingly scaled down their projections for the elections. They understand it would be impossible to replicate or come close to their 2011 gains.

A considerable part of the Nour Party's hardcore base see the party as positioned on the wrong side of the perceived war on Islam. These supporters feel disenfranchised, and in case of any potential interest in voting, it would be difficult for them to find a candidate to support. The party's most reliable source of support lies with apolitical, religious voters who will always choose a pious candidate regardless of affiliation.

The political parties and the movements that left the Anti-Coup Alliance in 2014 will not step in to fill the gap. Al-Wasat, a moderate Islamist party founded by former Brotherhood members in the 1990s, and the Salafi Watan Party expressed frustration with the Alliance's stagnant strategies.<sup>22</sup> Both parties have said they would take the time for self-reevaluation, rather than contesting elections, for which they do not have the required network and logistical infrastructure.<sup>23</sup>

## Breaking Away from Politics

Since Morsi's ouster, Muslim Brotherhood supporters and the smaller groups that associated themselves with the now-outlawed Anti-Coup Alliance have adopted a confrontational strategy of street demonstrations that usually escalate into clashes.<sup>24</sup> In 2014, members of the

Brotherhood-dominated Alliance called for the boycott of what they saw as "blood elections." The dominating discourse denounces the legitimacy of the current regime and any decisions or procedures that happened after July 3, 2013.<sup>25</sup> Demonstrations call for Morsi's reinstatement, and young supporters have their eyes set on radical revolutionary solutions.

In November 2014, the Salafi Front called for what it labeled the "Islamic Revolution," but failed to get notable numbers in the street. It nonetheless cemented the idea that parts of the Salafi constituency are also seeking governmental change outside institutional processes.

Gradually, protesters have expressed frustration with the futility of street action, mainly due to a deadly security crackdown backed by November 2013 legislation restricting demonstrations. Many protesters and activists ended up in jail or dead. A dip in the number and frequency of protests coincided with a rise in attacks which initially targeted mainly security forces.

There are indicators suggesting "a substantial reorientation of the Brotherhood" toward violence, which, along with a similar escalation of the state toward violence, is pushing the country into a deadly phase.<sup>26</sup> For example, in May 2015, the Brotherhood endorsed a call by a number of religious leaders to fight the coup by all means possible, including seeking retribution against officers, judges, and politicians complicit in "shedding the blood of the innocent."<sup>27</sup>

This change is not limited to the Brotherhood but echoes across different religious conservative groups and their supporters. A number of Anti-Coup Alliance defectors said in 2014 that they left so as not to give political cover to violence from the base they supposedly represented. In interviews conducted in September and October 2014, representatives of the Wasat Party, the Watan Party, and the Salafi Front, and other politicians close to Islamists disagreed over the level of organization involved in conducting this violence, but expressed concerns that the youth within their wider circles are increasingly embracing violence.

The Raba'a massacre is the cornerstone of the justification for violent tactics by Islamists. Over one thousand

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21 Mokhtar Awad, "The Salafi Dawa of Alexandria—the Politics of a Religious Movement," Hudson Institute, August 14, 2014, <http://www.hudson.org/research/10463-the-salafi-dawa-of-alexandria-the-politics-of-a-religious-movement>.

22 The demand of some of their partners and their base to reinstate Morsi is a deal breaker for other groups that protested against the Islamist president—and that's just the tip of the iceberg of obstacles precluding cooperation with non-Islamists.

23 Interview with the author.

24 A court ruled to ban the activities of the Alliance on September 29 and the verdict was applied by the cabinet on October 30. See "Egypt's PM Bans Pro-Morsi NASL Alliance," *Ahram Online*, October 30, 2014,

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<http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/113258.aspx>.

25 Morsi sent a letter from behind bars late October reiterating the same message.

26 Mokhtar Awad and Nathan J. Brown, "Mutual Escalation in Egypt," *Washington Post*, February 9, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/02/09/mutual-escalation-in-egypt/>.

27 Muslim Brotherhood official website, "Statement from the Muslim Brotherhood Regarding the Egypt Call Statement," May 28, 2015, <http://ikhwanonline.com/BrotherhoodStatements/50/Default.aspx> (in Arabic).

were killed on August 14, 2013, in two pro-Morsi sit-ins in Cairo, the deadliest single security crackdown to date.<sup>28</sup> The four-fingered gesture (Raba'a, the square that witnessed most of the killings, is also Arabic for "fourth") has become emblematic of the movement and a fixture at every protest. The killings triggered an immediate backlash; hours after they happened, churches and police stations were attacked in retaliation.

Since then, violence has evolved into other forms. In 2014 and early 2015, Egypt witnessed a sharp rise in the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), in addition to dummy bombs and false alarms. The attacks initially targeted security forces, but gradually expanded to include international businesses, diplomatic missions, and state facilities such as electricity pylons.

On social media, a group called "Revolutionary Punishment" has claimed responsibility for small-scale attacks on security forces. Other similar attacks, such as torching buildings or police vehicles, remain unclaimed. On satellite channels broadcast (mainly from Turkey and Qatar), guests, religious scholars, and leading Islamist figures encourage the violence and issue threats.<sup>29</sup>

This coincided with an increase in attacks by the Sinai State, a terrorist group based in Sinai which pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in 2014. Despite citing the security crackdown on Islamists as one of its motivations, the group has also denounced Morsi. Its attacks, mainly in the Sinai Peninsula, employ heavy weaponry and more sophisticated fighting tactics than those in mainland Egypt and cause the largest number of casualties.

More young Egyptians, who have lost faith in the political process and their religious leaders, have been slowly radicalizing. There is a concern about the decreasing ability of religious scholars to convince these Islamist youths to refrain from violence, especially in a context where armed groups like ISIS provide "successful" models of favoring force over politics in the region.

## On the Edge of Participation

Calls and campaigns for election boycotts over the past four years have also emerged from the secular camp op-

28 Human Rights Watch, *All According to Plan: The Rab'a Massacre and Mass Killings of Protesters in Egypt* (August 12, 2014), <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2014/08/12/all-according-plan-0>. The report argued that the crackdown on pro-Morsi sit-ins on August 14, 2013, was preplanned and not a mere case of disproportionate use of force. It described the security conduct on that day and during the following week as possible crimes against humanity.

29 "Pro-Brotherhood Media Air Calls for Violence," BBC, February 23, 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/monitoring/probrotherhood-media-air-calls-for-violence>.

posing the Muslim Brotherhood. These decried a process designed to favor candidates with more funds, closer ties to the regime, and unmatched networks.<sup>30</sup> Their concerns about the fairness of the process and its context are more valid in 2014-15 than in previous years.

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The shortcomings of Egypt's election process are well-documented by various international monitors. In its preliminary report on the presidential elections in May 2014, the European Union (EU) Observation Mission said that opposition to the roadmap resulted in "non-participation of some stakeholders."<sup>31</sup> It noted various flaws within the political context, including restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly, disproportionate use of force against protests, and prosecutions and death sentences handed down to hundreds of alleged Brotherhood supporters in just two court cases.<sup>32</sup> In 2015, the EU did not send a full observation mission to the scheduled parliamentary elections because the European Parliament raised concerns about Egypt's human rights record, freedom of expression and assembly, and political pluralism.<sup>33</sup> The Carter Center, which monitored previous elections, closed its Egypt office in October 2014 saying that the current environment in Egypt is not conducive to genuine democratic elections and civic participation.<sup>34</sup>

These concerns illustrate the drawbacks of holding elections in a noncompetitive environment. They also

30 Different boycott campaigns emerged against Islamist-dominated elections. The most organized was launched before the runoff of the presidential elections in June 2012. See Sarah El Sirgany, "Egyptian Elections: Choose None of the Above," May 31, 2012, <http://english.alexbar.com/content/egyptian-elections-choose-none-above>.

31 European Union Election Observation Mission, "Presidential Election Administered in Line with the Law, In an Environment Falling Short of Constitutional Principles," May 29, 2014, [http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/egypt/press\\_corner/all\\_news/news/2014/20140529\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/egypt/press_corner/all_news/news/2014/20140529_en.pdf).

32 Ibid.

33 "EU Won't Monitor Upcoming Elections, Rebukes Egypt for Human Rights Record," *Mada Masr*, January 16, 2015, <http://www.madamasr.com/news/eu-wont-monitor-upcoming-elections-rebukes-egypt-human-rights-record>.

34 Carter Center, "Carter Center Closes Egypt Office; Calls for Stronger Protections for Democratic Rights and Freedoms," October 14, 2014, <http://www.cartercenter.org/news/pr/egypt-101514.html>.



Supporters of Mohamed Morsi took to the streets after the former President was ousted from power in July 2013. *Photo credit: Gregg Carlstrom/Flickr.*

describe a political landscape where alternative paths toward democratization are eroding. This dilemma is at the heart of the internal debates about participation within political parties already struggling with a myriad of other internal problems.

The National Salvation Front (NSF), which formed the political backbone of opposition against Morsi in 2012 and 2013, has disintegrated. The negotiations among these parties initially aimed to form a democratic bloc that would stand against the pro-military parties and independent candidates expected to dominate the parliament. Now, some of its members, including the decades-old Wafd Party, the four-year-old Free Egyptians Party (FEP), and the Social Democratic Party, are involved in unending negotiations about electoral alliances. Others, like the leftist Socialist Popular Alliance and the centrist Constitution Parties, have opted to boycott the anticipated parliamentary elections.

In 2014, proponents of electoral participation were temporarily winning the uphill battle to convince their younger members of the merits of elections, despite the arrest and imprisonment of scores of activists, some of whom were party members.

The reluctance of these youth to engage in formal politics is incomparable to their Islamist counterparts, who perceive an enduring blood feud. Even the more radical movements among young people who position themselves in opposition to both the military and Islamist regimes had at one point campaigned for electoral participation.

The Revolutionary Socialists movement called on its supporters to vote for Hamdeen Sabahy in the May 2014 presidential elections, aiming to increase his share of the vote in a race his opponent was predetermined to win. Members of the movement argued that this would help establish strong opposition that could challenge Sisi's claim to overwhelming majority support. They rebuffed arguments in favor of the boycott by asserting its historical futility.<sup>35</sup>

In the second half of 2014, a campaign called Hashd, the Arabic acronym for the Democratic Youth Movement, tried to coordinate youth from different political parties to contest the elections.

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35 In a series of articles posted on Revolutionary Socialists' website throughout May 2014, the group's members discussed boycotting, starting with academic arguments about representative democracy to issues specific to Egypt. See <http://revsoc.me/politics/24796/> (in Arabic); <http://revsoc.me/politics/25290/> (in Arabic).

At the same time, the newly formed Bread and Liberty Party, an offshoot of the Socialist Alliance Party, worked on a grassroots level in a number of densely populated, lower-income neighborhoods to cultivate candidates who could run in the parliamentary elections.

“This political battle will give me room for movement. My youth engage on the street . . . Instead of drawing graffiti, they are talking education, health, and housing. They are known. I want them to run in municipal elections,” said Mohamed Abdo from the Bread and Liberty Party in 2014, when he described his party as the one closest to youth. In 2011, he campaigned for the Thawra Mostamera (Revolution Continues) electoral lists that managed to get a few seats in parliament despite a lack of funds. He said all gains, including negotiations about political detainees, were made through political venues. “I either practice politics or leave it altogether. And leaving it means deploying youth to the streets to be shot at or use arms themselves.”<sup>36</sup>

More established parties already occupying positions in the post-June 30, 2013 governments saw that despite the funding challenges they faced, they had to continue elections. Many of these parties were formed after the 2012 parliament and are electorally untested. Maintaining a space for opposition in parliament, regardless of scale or efficacy, is better than nothing, politicians argued.

Then, the murder of Shaimaa El-Sabagh changed everything. Along with fellow members of the Popular Socialist Alliance Party, El-Sabagh carried flowers and party banners in a January 24 march commemorating the martyrs of the 2011 revolution when a policeman shot her dead. “Her assassination sends a clear message against political and partisan life,” Socialist Alliance member Elhamy El-Marghany told reporters the following day.<sup>37</sup> Political parties threatened to withdraw from active participation in politics unless their demands for reconsidering the controversial protest law, removing the Interior Minister, and guaranteeing the fairness of the electoral process were realized.

In the following days, most of these opposition political parties, led by the Socialist Alliance, Constitution, and Bread and Liberty Parties, announced they would not be fielding candidates. Those who championed a boycott won.

However, it would be wrong to understand the parties’ and movements’ boycott decisions solely through the El-Sabagh incident. The self-proclaimed democracy

camp suffers from many ills, most importantly the loss of credibility.

The leaders of the NSF took part in the post-Morsi governments in 2013. Not only did they fail to push for the ideals of democracy and justice promoted by their parties, but some of them defended the repressive legislation and security practices adopted by subsequent governments. Their failure to campaign for nonviolence in August 2013 contributed to “the death of Egyptian politics.”<sup>38</sup> Throughout the past two years, parties found themselves in crises questioning their founding principles. Electoral alliances were reduced to the basic questions of how a party defined January 25, 2011, and June 30, 2013—revolution or conspiracy and revolution or coup, respectively—and whether they supported or opposed the executive authorities. These problems hindered their ability to mobilize members, much less potential voters.

## BOYCOTTERS FAILED TO CHALLENGE THE STATUS QUO OR ALTER THE RESULTS OF THE ELECTIONS.

In the presidential elections, the April 6 Youth Movement, the Revolutionary Socialists, and the Constitution Party could not rally the vote. Sabahy (757,511 out of 25.5 million votes) came third after Sisi (23.7 million) and spoiled ballots (1,040,608).<sup>39</sup> Sabahy got more than quadruple that number in the 2012 race.

The El-Tayyar El-Shaabi, or the Popular Current, which provided the backbone of Sabahy’s electoral campaigns in 2012 and 2014, also considered a boycott long before El-Sabagh’s murder, citing violations of freedoms and vilification of opposition forces.<sup>40</sup>

Eventually, the Popular Current boycotted the parliamentary elections. Out of the entities mentioned above, only the Social Democrats, the Wafd Party, and the FEP were still running when the elections were postponed in March 2015. In the build-up to the parliamentary elections, Hashd lost many potential candidates from the boycotting parties. “People decided against running because their colleagues are calling them traitors,” one

38 Amr Hamzawy, “7 Signs of the Death of Egyptian Politics,” Middle East Institute, August 19, 2013, <http://www.mei.edu/content/7-signs-death-egyptian-politics>.

39 Presidential Election Committee, 2014, <https://pres2014.elections.eg/presidential-elections-2014-results>.

40 Interview with the author.

36 Interview with the author, September 2014.

37 Joint press conference at the Socialist Popular Alliance Party headquarters, January 25, 2015.



of its young founders said.<sup>41</sup> The Tamarod (Rebellion) campaign that led protests against Morsi in 2013 has suffered from public disagreements among its founding members that undermined the credibility of any one of them trying to contest elections.

Most political parties have their own set of internal problems to address. The inability of their leaders to convince many members to participate in the elections is the most telling indicator of their ability, or lack thereof, to build political constituencies that believe in and fight for the parties' principles. Without strong representatives promoting various ideologies, the political spectrum becomes more homogeneous, subsequently reducing the appeal to voters and increasing apathy.

## Conclusion

Boycotts only work if they present serious threats with the potential to embarrass regimes into concessions, or if the boycotters have an alternative plan.<sup>42</sup> Neither scenario applies to Egypt. Boycott campaigns in November 2011 and June 2012 took place against the backdrop of a Tahrir Square brimming with one sit-in after another. Yet, the boycotters failed to challenge the status quo or alter the results of the elections. Consequently, opposition forces and activists have no illusion that a boycott this year would lead to an alternative path. The protest law and the violent police handling of demonstrations have seriously damaged the efficacy of street action. The boycotts stemming from the opposition forces, ranging from the Revolutionary Socialists movement to the centrist Constitution Party, are rooted in frustration and the belief that there is no alternative. The Islamists still believe, despite many rising voices frustrated with the failing confrontational tactics and their high cost, that there are numerous, if violent, alternatives to formal politics.

While the Islamists and secular opposition groups differ on possible alternatives, they share a defining strategy: betting on or waiting for the failure of the state. Instead of seeing a window of opportunity, political parties perceive participation as a "no-win" dilemma; running for parliament would cost them members, and losing would confirm the perception of their status as weak parties with no popular base. "The revolutionaries are isolating themselves," said one former MP in February 2015 as he coordinated the Social Democratic Party's election plan.<sup>43</sup>

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41 Interview with the author.

42 Matthew Frankel, "Election Boycotts Don't Work," *Daily Beast*, November 3, 2009, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2009/11/03/election-boycotts-dont-work.html>.

43 Interview with the author.

However, the current situation is not solely the result of weak political parties or unwise choices. Many Egyptians are not interested in elections and have been discouraged from participating. One sign of the disappearance of the vigorous political debates of 2011-12 is that activists do not feel the need to organize boycotts anymore. The number of candidates dropped from 10,364 in the 2011-12 parliamentary elections to 7,416 in the 2015 canceled elections despite an increase in the number of parliamentary seats.<sup>44</sup>

Parties should fulfill their promises to network, build grassroots support, and formulate an alternative in case the state fails. Instead of complaining of voters' lack of interest in the process, they should invest in building a political constituency to back their demands for democratization. The world's successful transitions to democracy over the past four decades in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Africa required this and other types of engagement with "the messy business of politics."<sup>45</sup>

Despite these shortcomings, the onus for any progress is on the state. The participation of Islamist voters in the political process requires steps that the state is currently unwilling to take, including real investigations into security's deadly crackdowns. The state needs to revisit security policies that have contributed to the radicalization of Islamist youth and the alienation of their secular counterparts.

Incidents like the arrest of ten members of the Strong Egypt, a moderate Islamist party, during the campaign for a "no" vote ahead of the January 2014 referendum dissuaded that party from future participation and is often cited by boycott proponents across the political spectrum.

The military regime's apparent disdain for both politics and politicians translates into policies that diminish political pluralism.<sup>46</sup> The resulting alienation of opposition forces should not be a cause for celebration for the state, as it undermines the democratic nature of the electoral process and the stability of the elected bodies.

Sisi should listen to Mohamed El-Sadat, head of the Reform and Development Party, who advised against the vilification of and restrictions on political parties, pushing Sisi's supporters (potentially including El-Sadat himself) outside organized political work. This "negatively affects stability and increases violence and

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44 Media Statement by the High Electoral Commission, February 22, 2015, [https://www.elections.eg/images/pdfs/press-releases/press\\_release-22Feb2015\\_2.pdf](https://www.elections.eg/images/pdfs/press-releases/press_release-22Feb2015_2.pdf).

45 Stephen Grand, *Understanding Tahrir Square*, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2014), pp. 178, 191.

46 Mohamed El-Shewy, "Sisi's Parliamentary Fears," *Sada*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 6, 2015, [http://carnegiendowment.org/sada/index.cfm?fa=show&article=59276&solr\\_hilite=](http://carnegiendowment.org/sada/index.cfm?fa=show&article=59276&solr_hilite=)

confrontations. Legitimate venues will be unable to manage the political dispute, while those in disagreement will seek other means on the street to express their opinion and pressure the government, and this is when the worst will happen," El-Sadat said.<sup>47</sup>

Inclusivity is the parliament's primary shield against irrelevance. The decision to postpone the elections offered the state another opportunity to engage in a genuine dialogue with all political parties and kickstart a new phase of true inclusivity. The Constitutional Court ruled in March 2015 that the electoral law unevenly divided constituencies. Accordingly, the legislative committee tasked with reviewing the law was expected to solely address that specific article, not the controversial ones cited by a number of political parties and observers—such as those stipulating only four absolute electoral lists. Yet, the possibility existed, if the regime had the political will, that other articles would be addressed which

could convince the parties that jumped ship to rejoin when elections resume.

Procedural democracy that lacks genuine participation and is not inclusive of all sectors of society has proven to be unsustainable and explosive, whether in the parliamentary elections that took place in the months before the 2011 uprising, or the various votes canceled over the past four years. The current repressive policies might prolong the life of weak institutions but are ultimately unlikely to prevent their disintegration due to a lack of practical democracy. The security challenges that low-level insurgency present should be an incentive for more inclusive policies to involve more stakeholders, not an excuse for repressive practices. Egyptian fatigue with politics and street action should not justify abandoning political pluralism, but rather should motivate all sides involved to find genuine and innovative approaches to revive the democratic process.

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<sup>47</sup> Reform and Development Party statement, received by the author on February 15, 2015.

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