

## EGYPT: THE PRESENT

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### **Winds of change blow slowly in Egypt**

By Fergus Nichol  
BBC News, Cairo

**Egypt has been voting in its first contested presidential elections. The result, as universally predicted, is a victory and a fifth six-year term for veteran President Hosni Mubarak. So what, if anything, has changed?**

In many of his greatest and often bleakest novels, Naguib Mahfouz, Egypt's Nobel laureate, ponders the effect of Western influence, modernisation and change - both the allure and the danger - on the slum neighbourhoods of Cairo.

In all my writing, he once said, you'll find politics. You might find a story which leaves out love or some other subject, but never politics. It's the very axis of our thinking.

He was less interested in ticking off historical landmarks than in weighing the psychological impact of change on a typical family in a Cairo backstreet.

Standing in a noisy scrum of voters and polling station officials in the ramshackle suburb of Imbaba on election day, I wondered what Mahfouz would have made of this great day for democracy, in a place so reminiscent of his own old stories.

### **Hosni Mubarak's government set out not to adapt to change, but to control it**

A place left behind by progress, forgotten by government. People living in broken down apartments, in rutted dusty lanes just 10 blocks away from Mercedes showrooms and Siemens fridge-freezers - and asked to believe in a new republic.

Of course, it wasn't just the vocal middle classes assessing the potential risks and benefits of change during the three-week campaign, that crash course in facsimile democracy.

What would change for the young woman in her modest, yet elegant, pink hijab headscarf bent over a sewing machine on the grinding 0800 to 2000 shift in a Heliopolis shirt factory?

Or the young man in Hurghada who's been sent back to his village from a building site on the Red Sea coast because the tourists suddenly stopped coming?

For the first time, in theory at least, they have the opportunity to place in the balance the well-known old order - what one magazine called, in a rush of blood to the head brought on by the intoxication of new press freedoms, "the Pharaoh presidency". And on the other side, a leap into the unknown.

### **Election rules**

But the government put a lot of clear blue water between that theory and the practice. Forced by outside pressure into an election it never wanted, Mr Mubarak's government set out not to adapt to change, but to control it, in the process drawing a new template for cynical election management.

Rule number one: allow only nationally unfamiliar figures or out-and-out no-hopers to stand against the president.

Rule number two: ban the Muslim Brotherhood - a non-violent group that's hugely popular on the street, precisely because it provides the medical, sporting and social security network that the government doesn't.

Rule number three: stop the last voter registration drive just before the announcement of the country's first ever multi-candidate race.

With the full weight of the ruling party machine on his side, a Mubarak victory was always inevitable, but what can be said about his mandate?

A population of 75 million people, 32 million declared eligible as properly registered.

The most generous independent observers put the turnout at about 15%.

So if Mr Mubarak sweeps the board with, say, 70%, a quick run through the maths gives us fewer than four million people endorsing the president.

Even taking account of the kids below voting age, four out of 75 isn't so much a landslide as a rattle of loose stone.

### **Heir apparent**

Are there then no prospects for change?

Well, it may have proven largely immune to the cajoling, hectoring or straightforward abuse from outside its ranks, but the ruling National Democratic party may prove vulnerable to agents of change from within.

And, extraordinarily, they are centred on the president's own son, Gamal Mubarak.

Now highly placed in the party, he has single-handedly infused many of the key ministries of state with a new dynamism.

He denies that he is the anointed president-in-waiting. Nobody believes him of course, but that doesn't mean he's not telling the truth.

And there were other glimpses of a new order on the campaign trail to inspire confidence in future change.

The boldness in the press - which progressed exponentially from cautious criticism to downright libel - was matched to an even greater extent by a boldness in street protests.

With demonstrators young and old relishing their first ever chance to scream "Down with the president!" without being swiftly moved on to unpleasant police accommodation.

But the old order was always in plain sight and often in plain clothes. Party fixers and security personnel in identical cheap suits mingling obviously in the crowds, with back-up on call from the young and menacing street thugs.

None of them yet seeing the need to let go, to get used to the idea that there's a new way of doing things.

So the winds of change blow sluggishly on the Nile. There's not long to wait until the next test of press freedom, of fledgling people power on the street, of those shiny new campaign strategies.

Egypt's national assembly elections are just weeks away.

Oh and by the way, I did since find out what Mr Mahfouz makes of all this.

He's 95 now, but he's still writing and in a short, weekly newspaper column he wrote:

"The relationship between the government and the public is undergoing a fundamental change. A nation that votes is one that demands accountability. A nation that selects from multiple candidates expects a winner to keep his promise."

Story from BBC NEWS:

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/programmes/from\\_our\\_own\\_correspondent/4230572.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/4230572.stm)

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**Egypt poll clashes leave six dead  
Egyptian police have shot dead six people during protests by Islamists barred from voting during the final stage of the parliamentary election.**

Live rounds were fired along with tear gas and rubber bullets as police struggled to keep Muslim Brotherhood supporters reaching polling stations.

The banned party, whose candidates stood as independents, has made large gains, winning nearly 20% of seats.

Nine people have now died since the election began on 9 November.

Islamists say police tactics are designed to limit their gains and help the ruling National Democratic Party.

**MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD**

Egypt's oldest and largest Islamist organisation

Founded by Hasan al-Banna in 1928

Group has influenced Islamist movements worldwide

Mixes political activism with charity work

Banned from open political activity

Rejects the use of violence and supports democratic principles

Wants to create a state governed by Islamic law

Slogan: "Islam is the Solution"

The US has criticised the conduct of the poll, saying it sends the wrong signal about Egypt's commitment to reform. The BBC's Heba Saleh reports from Cairo that the same government which broadcast television ads encouraging Egyptians to go to the polls, chased them away when they turned up to vote.

Local newspapers, she adds, have run countless pictures of thugs hired by the ruling party brandishing knives and sticks to intimidate opposition supporters.

Brotherhood supporters fought riot police with stones and petrol bombs.

According to hospital and anonymous police sources, scores of people were also injured in the clashes which centred on provincial towns:

- At least two people died in the northern town of Damietta
- In the Nile Delta town of Zagazig, government supporters armed with knives and machetes reportedly attacked voters outside several polling stations; a 14-year-old boy and a 22-year-old man were killed in violence in the nearby village of Qattawiya
- Two men were shot dead in Dakahliya Province, also in the Nile Delta
- Some 600 people were wounded in violence in Cairo and there were 80 arrests.

### **'Nobody enters'**

Interior ministry spokesman Ibrahim Hammad said that Brotherhood "thugs" had caused disturbances at 10 polling stations.

In Zagazig, an AP correspondent witnessed a confrontation between local Brotherhood candidate Mohammed al-Mursi and police outside a polling station.

"What are you afraid of? Why aren't you letting them inside?" he shouted at police barring hundreds of people from the station in Nasiriyah district.

A judge who arrived to supervise polling protested at the blockade and was allowed in along with a few women.

When a group of about 25 women tried to push through in turn, they were stopped by the police while their commander shouted "Nobody is entering here".

### **Difficult choice**

According to the Brotherhood, at least 1,400 of its members were arrested before Wednesday's polls, many of them campaign workers.

Brotherhood-backed independents have already won about 76 seats, five times as many as in the previous parliament. Run-offs were held for 127 districts.

In the short term, President Hosni Mubarak's ruling NDP will control parliament but its future dominance could now be in question, our correspondent says.

The Brotherhood's unexpected gains will make it difficult for the government to continue to deny the group legal recognition.

And analysts say the situation leaves Egyptians with a difficult choice between autocracy and Islamism.

Story from BBC NEWS:

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle\\_east/4505472.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/4505472.stm)

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### **Women and Copts named Egypt MPs**

**Egypt's president has named five women and five members of the Coptic Christian minority to parliament.**

The 10 appointed seats are usually used by the president to increase diversity in the 454-seat assembly.

It brings the number of Christians in the new parliament to six and the number of women to nine.

Results last week gave Hosni Mubarak's ruling party a comfortable majority, although Muslim Brotherhood supporters increased their presence substantially.

The only Copt to reach parliament by means of the ballot box was Finance Minister Yusef Boutros Ghali. The low level of Christian representation comes despite the minority accounting for about 10% of the population.

Turnout was little more than a quarter of the electorate. Analysts say Egyptian elections are generally marked by apathy and vote-rigging orchestrated by the ruling National Democratic Party.

This year the banned opposition Muslim Brotherhood - whose candidates stand as independents - won a record 88 seats, six times more than in the outgoing parliament.

Story from BBC NEWS:

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle\\_east/4521392.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/4521392.stm)

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