

Islamists march into the breach

Jon B. Alterman International Herald Tribune
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WASHINGTON It wasn't supposed to happen this way. Egypt's Islamist parliamentary candidates were supposed to win 40 or 50 seats in this fall's elections, about 10 percent of the total. Their limited victory was supposed to be part of a general reinvigoration of Egyptian political life. The self-proclaimed reformists in the ruling National Democratic Party were confident they could manage a transition to greater openness, and Western governments urged them on.

Yet as the dust settles after three rounds of voting, week, the Muslim Brotherhood has revealed itself to be the only viable opposition in the country.

The Brotherhood had been cautious, running candidates in only a third of the constituencies so as not to threaten the government's grip on power. Yet to the surprise of all, they captured a solid majority of races in which they competed, and will represent more than 20 percent of the new parliament. At the same time, Egypt's secular opposition withered to irrelevance.

The stunning capacity of Egypt's Islamist opposition to leap into the opening that political liberalization created, and the failure of secular liberal parties to prosper under those same conditions, poses a fundamental challenge to U.S. and European policymakers.

For years, they have sought to promote moderation in the Middle East by opening the political process. Repressive political systems generate hatred and terrorism, they counseled, and democracy tempers that rage.

Yet the new Egyptian legislature is likely to pose innumerable headaches for these same policymakers. Islamist legislators are likely to seek to stem Egyptian cooperation with the West on a host of issues, from Arab-Israeli peacemaking to Iraq to counter-terrorism (which many Islamists see as a thinly veiled Western effort to wage a war against Islam).

The greater challenges, however, lie with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian government. Brotherhood legislators will need to demonstrate effectiveness to their constituents, and the deck will be stacked against them. They remain a distinct minority in parliament, and the ruling party will have little reason to give them much. They will be cut off from patronage and services, the lifeblood of politics. Their constituents may suffer for having voted for them.

The Muslim Brotherhood also faces an uphill battle developing alternative strategies for a host of public policy issues. In the 77 years since it was founded, it has largely gotten by on slogans - most famously "Islam is the solution." But what will Islam tell them about Egypt's telecommunications policy, or how to create jobs for the hundreds of thousands of young Egyptians who enter the job market every year?

Daunting as the Brotherhood's problems are, the Egyptian government faces even greater ones. In what was effectively a referendum on its leadership, it came up short. The kinder, gentler National Democratic Party did worse than the politicians of old.

In the Parliament, rather than facing a diverse and squabbling band of dissenters, the party will have to answer tough questions from those who have little pretense about their long-term desire to force the government from power.

Consequently, the Egyptian government finds itself in a position that is at the same time comfortable and dangerous.

For many in the Egyptian elite, religious parties are anathema, and a strong Islamist opposition will help secularists to unite their base. Yet with just two parties, and an electorate deeply polarized between Islamist and secular forces, the ground is set for conflict.

In other countries in the Middle East - including Israel - religious parties often compete as part of a broader political landscape. In countries with large Muslim populations such as Indonesia and Bangladesh, religious parties are dwarfed by secular forces, and consequently they enter into coalitions and make compromises. Their entry into government elicits opposition, but it rarely elicits fear.

The problem in Egypt is not that the Islamists won 20 percent of the parliament. Rather it is that they are virtually alone in opposition. In the near term, Egypt's flirtation with greater democracy has brought it closer to internal conflict.

Egypt needs a stronger and more diverse opposition, not a weaker one. Allowing it to flourish is the best thing Egypt's current leadership can do for itself.

(Jon B. Alterman is director of the Middle East program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. He is a former member of the policy planning staff at the U.S. Department of State.)