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Title: Elections in Egypt: what outcome to expect ?

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C.H. 15 december 2011: I met with Fr. Joe Vella-Gauci on November 18 in Brussels. I received the questions in writing and also responded in writing. The answers thus should be read with this date in mind. By now we have seen two rounds of the Egyptian elections with three major parties and thus less fragmentation then I had expected on basis of the many political parties that had been formed and that had been campaigning in Egypt.

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Elections in Egypt: what outcome to expect ?

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What were the worst mistakes committed by Mubarak?

Most important is the gap between the rich and the poor that had been growing continuously. Economic growth could not match population growth (doubled since Mubarak became president), neither was there a fair distribution of wealth. Around 80 per cent of the population live on an income that is close to two dollars per day per person or even less than this. Mubarak often made promises about improvements but this was not felt by the great majority of the population. Mubarak was in recent years hardly in control anymore. People around him had taken over. His wife was preparing her son Gamal to become Egypt's next president. Mubarak had kept the emergency law in place since he became president after the murder of Sadat in 1981. That emergency law gave great prerogatives to the Egyptian police who have greatly misused this in heavy-handedly suppressing the Egyptian masses. Last but not least, his party manipulated the elections, making them a farce. I, however, like to add that not everything was negative during the Mubarak years. He, for example, greatly developed Egyptian infrastructure and tourism (in Sinai). Yet, the agricultural mega-project *Toshka* turned out to be a great disaster.

What is your impression about the Islamisation process in Egypt?

During Mubarak's rule it was forbidden to form religious political parties. Now that Mubarak is gone, people are turning to such parties. That is only natural since Egyptians are, and always have been, a very religious people. That applies to both Muslims and Christians. The problem is that some of these parties are very hostile to people with different beliefs, both to Muslims who do not adhere to their line of thinking and to Christians. The Freedom and Justice Party that is supported by the Muslim Brotherhood is definitely not as radical as some Salafi and other parties but it is also not trusted by many non-Islamists for reasons of the Muslim Brotherhood past and the statements of some of its members. Yet other members make great effort to present the party as more moderate. Ultimately their positions will be determined by their members. This is a process of which no one knows the outcome at this moment. It is expected that various Islam-oriented parties may win up to 65 percent of the vote. Coptic Christians and Egyptian liberals are very afraid that an Islamist government may restrict freedom of speech and religion.

Yet, western nations have to realize that efforts to push certain parties in Egypt could backfire. The best way to engage in Egypt is to support Egyptian efforts to fight poverty, to develop education and engage in dialogue with whoever is elected in Egypt. Boycotting Egypt if the Islamists are voted into power in genuine free elections - as the West did following the election of Hamas in Gaza - will only bolster radical Islam which is neither in the interest of Europe nor is it of Egypt.

What were the most urgent and legitimate demands of Egyptian youths during the uprising?

Most urgent were an end to police atrocities and the ending widespread corruption among government officials. The murder of the Egyptian youth Khaled Sa'id by police officers was a major issue that spread through Facebook and which triggered the revolution. They advocated democratisation as a means to empower the people and end the abuses they had witnessed.

How do you assess the referendum (of 19 March)? What happened to the slogan "Constitution First"? Don't you think that the revolution's spirit has been suffocated?

Egypt is deeply divided between people who are Islam-oriented and who express in a variety of ways how they believe Islam should play a role in a future government; and secular-oriented people, such as liberals and socialists. The great majority of religious Muslims want to keep Article 2 of the constitution that stipulates that Islamic law is the main source of legislation while most Coptic Christian and secular minded people advocate either changes in the formulation of this Article or its complete removal. Islamists turned the referendum into a rally in favour of maintaining Article 2 of the constitution.

Islamists want elections to take place as early as possible because traditionally they have been better organized than other parties - with the exception of the National Democratic Party of

President Mubarak that, however, after the fall of the president lost its prerogatives and was to a large extent dismantled. Islamists saw early elections as the way to dominate the parliament in which they wanted to make the changes in the constitution. Secular minded Egyptians were well aware of this and thus wanted the military to nominate a committee to change the constitution first and then have parliamentary elections. That process could have given them a greater say in changing the constitution and have more time to organize their own political parties including making efforts to obtain grassroots support. The senior officers in the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces have no experience in ruling the country and want civilians to take over as soon as possible. Yet, they speak with representatives of all sections in society and have obviously hesitated as to what direction to take. On the one hand, they want to withdraw and, on the other hand, they do not want to risk the prerogatives the army has enjoyed since 1952. They initially wanted parliamentary elections in September. These were postponed to the end of November. They are also now to take place in stages between November 28 and January 3. Furthermore, one-third of Egypt's 498 member parliament will be elected by an absolute majority vote in the districts they represent, the remaining two-thirds will be elected by a closed-list proportional representation system which had been favoured by many secular minded liberals and socialists. Those are changes that reflect a compromise between the various parties. The revolution's spirit has not been suffocated but the change from an authoritarian system to a democracy in a religious country that is facing huge economic challenges is proving to be extremely challenging.

Don't you not think that the military are well equipped to seize power, yet ill-equipped to govern?

The answer to this question is a clear yes! But this does not mean that there is an easy way out. Parties other than the former National Democratic Party have no experience in governance. They are also highly fragmented which, if this were to be reflected in the elections (which I expect), will make it very hard to form a government after the elections. Calls for the military to withdraw without presenting a viable and workable alternative are not realistic.

Actions speak for themselves! Could you please elaborate further on the actual predicament of Coptic Christians in Egypt?

Churches and individual believers have been attacked but usually where there was a reason: building a church that local Muslims did not want, a conflict about a Christian having a relationship with a Muslim woman and conversion issues. Christians have been forced to abide by rules set by local Muslim communities which is a consequence of an absent government in Egypt. What is needed is a clear and just law that regulates the restoration and building of churches. Also transparency in conversion issues is much needed. Christians are afraid of what the future will bring for them. Fear has made Christians withdraw while I believe that Christians should be encouraged to actively and publicly engage in dialogue with Muslims, including Islamists. The number of Christians actually doing so is much too small.

After the recent attack by the Army on the Copts (on Sunday 9 October), is it advisable to proceed as planned with the elections to the People's Assembly (the lower house of Parliament) and Consultative Council (Senate)

We prepared a major report on this attack which shows a peaceful demonstration that deteriorated into a bloodbath. Many details are known while other details were not made public. It is advisable to proceed as planned because the country is already paralysed (policy formation is delayed until after the elections) and continuing in this state would delay the return of the military to their barracks and Egypt getting out of the current severe economic decline.

Is there a single word in the vocabulary that explains in a nutshell the real process leading to the November General Elections? And, what outcome do you predict for these elections?

The process is an outcome of negotiations. The compromise is, however, not ideal. I predict great fragmentation and thus difficulties in the formation of a new government.

What is your reaction to the text of the [European Parliament's Resolution](#) on the situation in Egypt ?

I would like to underline that the EP Resolution recognizes that in Egypt economic development and a higher standard of living of the population are essential for long-term political and social stability in the country. Changes that will benefit all Egyptians will benefit Christians most. Egyptians are extremely sensitive regarding foreign interference and thus Europe would do best to explain to Egypt that violence against Christians bolsters Islamophobes in Europe which is neither in Egypt's nor Europe's interest.