

## Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

### Egypt's post-electoral challenges

*Will "election mania" delude President Mubarak into awaiting the Israeli and U.S. elections before tackling pressing issues?*

On May 27, a several-month-long electoral campaign generally described as Egypt's "most democratic since 1952" came to an end. The last day of the campaign didn't pass without major acts of violence, such as the death of an opposition candidate in Luxor, and pitched battles between rival groups in several other parts of the country.

Although the turnout of 30% of the population at the polls was low by Western standards, it no doubt reflected a major improvement from the 9-12% participation in previous elections under the late President Anwar al Sadat. Still suspicious of the last parliamentary elections in 1979, most people had failed to register last December, convinced that the elections would either be postponed or would not allow a real political debate.

Now sharing the 448 parliamentary seats are two main political groupings. President Hosni Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP), which portrayed itself as the true heir of Gamal Abdul Nasser's 1952 revolution, won 391 seats. The main opposition party, the Wafd or neo-Wafd of Fuad Serrageddine, a 70-year-old politician who was already a leader of the party under the monarchy, gained 57 seats and no more than 13-15% of the vote, a much lower score than the 20-25% party leaders had predicted.

Throwing away a "liberal" tradition of secularism which had notably attracted the large Coptic community,

the Wafd opportunistically decided to run the elections on the same platform as the Muslim Brotherhood. The Wafd played Islam as representing "Egypt's unity"; no small number of Coptic Christians bailed out, including one Wafd national secretary.

This creates new problems, since several members of the Muslim Brotherhood were elected to parliament and will be soon lobbying for full-scale Islamic Law in Egypt, encouraged by the suicidal recent decisions of Egypt's southern neighbor, Sudan, which are leading to civil war between southern Christians and northern Muslims in that country.

The surprise of the elections was the elimination of the smaller liberal or leftist parties which had been in the parliament before 1979. A last-minute new electoral law, passed by Prime Minister Mohieddine, imposing a minimum of 8% for proportional representation, ensured such a result. However, Mubarak has to decide soon on some 20 seats which are generally used to appoint spokesmen of specific communities and interests. Some of the defeated opposition leaders may be asked to join, though there will be little glory in becoming the "appointed opposition."

Egypt's main problem, apart from the presence of Muslim Brothers in the parliament, remains that the campaign did little to bring to the people the real issues facing the country. Heavy focus was placed on local social and economic issues, but the wider options of

the country's future were not debated. This affected the leadership as well, which decided to immerse itself in the electoral process, postponing all major decisions.

This has lost precious months for a country assailed by numerous potential crises. The crisis in the Sudan is becoming a major problem for Egypt. At stake is not simply whether Sudan will be "Islamized" or not, but its very ability to survive economically, a problem shared by all the other African countries, and shunted aside during the Egyptian electoral campaign.

Major initiatives in Africa, begun earlier in the year by Egyptian Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Dr. Butros Ghali, came to an abrupt halt, though it is rumored that Cairo may host the next Organization of African Unity (OAU) summit after Guinea's chairmanship ends. Lost in the campaign too have been Egypt's leadership in the Non-Aligned movement, and the hectic diplomatic exchanges of previous months in which Cairo supported the emergence of a Latin American debtors' cartel. Decisions on the Gulf military crisis, relations with Israel, and the issue of re-establishing diplomatic relations with Moscow have also been postponed until after the election.

The Kissinger-connected faction in Cairo around Minister for Foreign Affairs Kamal Hassan Ali is trying to persuade President Mubarak to continue the "election paralysis" and wait for the Israeli elections in July and the U.S. elections in November before making any decisions. Hassan Ali wants to wait for his friend Kissinger and his Anglo-American allies to gain more political power in Washington. If President Mubarak does not move rapidly, it will mean the transformation of Egypt into another Sudan, destroying the development potential of the entire African continent.