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From Tahrir Square to the ballot box > Elections in Egypt and Morocco mark a new stage in the Arab Spring

Legislative elections in Egypt and Morocco point to an ebbing of the revolutionary tide. But by creating winners and losers, they also have the potential to spark renewed friction.

Recent days have seen key elections take place in two pivotal Arab Spring countries. In Morocco, voters went to the polls on November 25th in parliamentary elections that were brought forward as part of a constitutional reform process. On November 28–29th it was Egypt's turn when voters scrambled to the ballot boxes for the first round in Egypt's parliamentary elections. Together with earlier polls for a National Constituent Assembly in Tunisia in late October, these elections mark a new turning point in the Arab Spring. By endowing freshly elected representatives with popular legitimacy, they will shift the centre of political activity away from the public square to the assembly chamber. However, by creating clear winners and losers, they are also likely to lead to renewed friction.

Although the elections in Morocco have been widely hailed as a success, they took place in an unfavorable atmosphere. Earlier this year, Morocco's King Mohamed VI reacted to popular protests by the February 20th Movement by launching a package of constitutional reforms. These brought some unprecedented changes, but also left the palace firmly in control over the key levers of power. While these reforms were subsequently approved in a popular

referendum by a stunning 98 per cent of voters, human rights organizations have since contested the legality of the outcome. Indeed, the results of the legislative elections suggest that there is still considerable mistrust and little enthusiasm for the King's managed reform agenda, even though popular protests have largely died down in the aftermath of the referendum.

With both the February 20th Movement and the banned Justice and Charity party (*Al-Adl wa Al-Ihssane*) calling for an election boycott, electoral turn-out remained noticeably low. Although the official turn-out of registered voters increased to 45 per cent, the actual number of voters declined, despite a lowering of the voting age from 20 to 18. Moreover, a full 20 per cent of ballots were spoiled by voters in a clear sign of disapproval of the available electoral choices.

The biggest winner in the elections, unsurprisingly, was the moderate Islamist Party for Justice and Development (PJD), garnering 107 out of 395 seats. With the PJD's Secretary General Abdelilah Benkirane having been appointed Morocco's new Prime Minister, the PJD will now have to walk a tight-rope between cooperating with the royal palace and popular demands

to further curtail the powers of the traditional elites.

In Egypt, developments have followed a different trajectory. Recent weeks have seen heightened tensions between protesters and the military, with clashes before the elections leaving scores dead and thousands wounded. Behind these lies the deepening divide between Egypt's revolutionary youth clamouring for deeper changes and the military's attempt to defend the status quo. But protesters have also been increasingly divided amongst themselves. While some have advocated a postponement of the elections and an immediate transition to a national salvation government, the Muslim Brotherhood has been more cautious about further protests and eager to follow through with the recent elections.

Despite these tensions, the first round of the Egyptian elections has seen a large turn-out of 52 per cent of registered voters and has passed off without any serious incidents. Although a number of minor violations were reported, overall the elections were credited as having been free and fair. And while the elections still have a long way to go, the trend is clear. The Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) won an impressive 49 per cent of the seats.

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Even more surprising has been the very strong showing of the Salafist al-Nour party, which garnered 20 per cent of the seats, pushing the liberal “Egyptian Bloc” into third place with only 11 per cent. The “Revolution Continues” party of youth activists won a mere 4 per cent. While the final results will not be announced until January, the fact that voting during this round was concentrated in Egypt’s major urban centres makes it unlikely for liberal parties to regain some ground during the upcoming rounds.

Regardless of the radically different circumstances and contexts of both elections, there are some similarities. First, in both countries the clear winners of the elections have been the “Islamists” (and the Salafists in Egypt). The Egyptian military and the Moroccan royal palace are also likely to benefit from holding free and fair elections. The clear losers have been the secular and liberal forces.

Second, by empowering elected delegates, the elections are likely to undermine the revolutionary legitimacy and “street power” of young protesters. This is going to reduce their influence and widen the existing gulf between protesters and established parties.

Third, with the main Islamist parties now having gained a major stake in the political order and an additional incentive to appear as moderates, they are likely to pursue evolutionary, rather than revolutionary change in both Egypt and Morocco.

All of this suggests that the revolutionary tide in Egypt and Morocco is ebbing, but the potential for renewed friction is also apparent. Young protesters, having disapproved of the electoral process, might return to the streets to vent their frustration. Liberals and secularists, having failed at the ballot boxes, might become more malleable to the military. The Salafists, emboldened by their strong showing, might denounce democracy unless they see their demands implemented. And Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood will be increasingly caught in the crossfire between the different sides. This leaves plenty of room for friction, and spoilers are likely to appear.

In both evolutionary Morocco and revolutionary Egypt, the elections have marked a major step forward. But by creating clear winners and losers they will also test the cohesion of the pro-democracy forces.