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View Point

Islamist Forces' Prospects in post-Revolution Egyptian Elections

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After a long phase of unrest and anxiety in the post-revolutionary period in Egypt, people are now gearing up for the forthcoming general elections to be held in three phases from 28th November to 3rd January for which campaign has already begun.

There are thirty four political parties registered with the Committee of Political Parties and fourteen of these are Islamic parties. It is interesting to note that all such parties were earlier banned in the country. Also, for the first time in modern Egypt, a large number of religious parties have been permitted to participate in the national election. The rapid growth of these religious parties is the result of the approval by the Committee of Political Parties and the Administrative Court. It is believed that the forthcoming election will be a real test of the popularity and the base of these religious forces among the Egyptian people. One will have to wait to see to what extent their ideologies and programmes are endorsed by the masses.

Immediately after the fall of Hosni Mubarak, the Islamic groups have spurred into action in search of a role and also for political gains in new emerging power setup. The revolution brought benefits to many, including the Salafists who have now an opportunity to establish their political identity. There are other smaller parties like Construction and Development Party, Fadhila Party, Salafist al-Asala

(Authenticity), Al Haya al-Sharia lil Islah who have also come up on the national scene.

The Muslim Brotherhood (MBH) is the oldest and the most disciplined organization in Egyptian political arena whose existence has spanned for more than eight decades. This organisation has always played the role of opposition against the “autocratic” regimes in past. MBH has created its political wing called “The Freedom and Justice Party” (FJP) to contest the election, which is said to be the real claimant of victory because of its huge political experiences and roots in the society.

The MBH too, like other Islamic forces, acted as a part of civil society in the revolution and joined the revolutionary forces for national cause. What was more surprising was that they did not make use of the Islamist customary rubric. They kept a low profile during the revolution for tactical reasons knowing well that any active participation on their part would cause alarmist reaction from the west.

After the revolution, the political discourse of these Islamists is undergoing a major change and they have started using mosque for political campaign. They are seen chanting Islamic slogans and completely ignoring the official norms.

MBH has been seeking mainstream support in this election. Liberal and secular forces are taking MBH as their true rival and find it a major threat to their political future. The General Secretary of FJP, Dr. Mohammad Musa has observed that his party has become a point of worry for all in election.

A survey conducted by Al Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies found that 39 percent out of the 62 percent who may exercise their franchise would support Freedom and Justice Party. Islamist forces are also aware that only ‘Islam’ will not help them in gaining victory so they are focussing on both political and social agenda. One of the officials of Freedom and Justice Party has noted that, “Though party has Islamic term of reference, but it also advocates freedom for all Egyptians regardless of their religions. He further observed that his party did not restrict the participation of women in national politics and several women will be contesting elections. Likewise, Mr. Hyakal, a well known political commentator of Egypt has

observed that Egypt being a ‘civilized country’ cannot be ruled with single religion alone”. Yusuf Badri, an eminent Islamic scholar has noted that FJP can only stand to gain under a democratic order that recognises the existence of all shades of opinions and principle of mutual respect.

Nour Party, the political wing of Salafists, is another group calling for the creation of an Islamic state. Their insistence on Islamic identity and animosity towards the minority are prominent elements of their political discourse. This has triggered fear among the Coptic minority. There are reports of clashes between Coptic and the Salafists and many churches have been attacked.

The election’ process in Egypt is a contest between secularist and Islamic ideology. Liberals have launched their own party “Liberal Egyptians” and are not lagging behind in asserting their religiosity. Liberal Egyptians have announced to espouse an article in the current Constitution making Islam the official religion of Egypt and Shariah, the main source of legislations. Islamists are pretending to be more moderate while liberals are claiming to be more Islamic.

FJP is hoping for 40 percent of parliamentary seats and the present trends and scenarios in the Arab world are conducive for FJP to win this election. The people who have been denied political and social rights and have suffered illiteracy and poverty in past are seeing some hope in the emerging alternative in the form of Islamic parties. It would not be wrong to suggest that it is ‘non- performance’ by the past regimes that have helped these Islamist to emerge as an alternative.

MBH, being the oldest organization, is well acquainted with the Egyptian political culture, pulse of the masses and has all the chances of winning. But there are other forces which might jeopardise its chance. For instance, Al-Tayar Al-Misri (Egyptian Current) and Wast (Middle) party are causing factionalism among Islamic forces. Democratic Alliance formed with Construction and Development Party and Nour Party under MBH has already collapsed.

Despite this factionalism and lack of unity among Islamic groups, it is plausible that Islamist forces under the leadership of FJP would emerge as the largest winning alliance because of favourable domestic and regional circumstances.

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