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OPEMAM Analysis

INTERVIEW:

EGYPT/ Legislative elections

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Barbara Azaola, lecturer and researcher at the University of Castilla La Mancha, interviewed by Rafael Bustos.

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Bárbara Azaola, lecturer at the Faculty of Humanities and researcher at Toledo School of Translators, University of Castilla La Mancha, specialized in contemporary Egypt, monitored the first round of the Egyptian legislative elections in situ (November 28th and 29th). Rafael Bustos, OPEMAM, conducted the following interview.

Interview

OPEMAM: Arriving in Cairo before the election dates, what irregularities or problems in relation with the electoral registration process - inscription and updating - and the electoral campaign have you witnessed?

BA: After the amendments made to the electoral law on September 2011, every Egyptian over 18 has been allowed to vote in these elections and, as in the constitutional referendum held on March 2011, a universal automatic voter registration system based on a national identification database has been used. This database includes updated information about every citizen over 16. Eligible voters are registered along with their address and identity number. Citizens could check their district and polling station on a web site and a phone number and only needed to show their identity cards to cast their votes.

Regarding the electoral campaign, except for the cases of money and food granted to eligible voters by Islamist parties during the celebration of the Festival of Sacrifice (early November) and their use of religious slogans, it went ahead smoothly. The last days of the campaign prior to the beginning of the first phase of the elections (from November 20), the security forces made a disproportionate use of violence for four days against the protesters in Tahrir Square (el Cairo), resulting in 45 dead protesters. Some parties, including those of the Revolution Continues Alliance, cancelled their campaign acts for two days but did not give up competing in the electoral race.

OPEMAM: The mixed electoral system used in the elections to the Assembly is rather new, except for the classic binominal system (workers and professionals). Don't you consider it too complex, both because of the ballots and because of the number of times Egyptians are called to vote? Isn't it disappointing in terms of female and minorities representation?

BA: Effectively, the electoral law resulting from last September's amendments is too complex and the duration of the electoral process too long. As there needs to be judicial supervision of all the electoral process, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) decided to divide both the elections to the lower and to the higher chamber into three phases so that judges were able to be present in every polling station in the country. It is a division into governorates: of the 27 that make up the country, the division includes 9 per voting phase. There is a first round in each phase, which at first was to last one day but ended up taking two, partly because of the delay at the beginning of the voting process on the first day due to several irregularities (a lack of ballot papers, closed polling stations, delays by judges and staff members of the polling stations, etc.). A week after the first round of each phase the second round takes place just for individual candidacies, among those not obtaining more than 50% in the first round. According to the present electoral system, two thirds of the

parliament's seats (332) are elected through closed proportional party lists and one third of the deputies (166) is elected through individual candidacies. Voters must each put cast two ballot papers, each one of them into a different ballot box.

Regarding female representation, according to the new amendments made to the electoral law, each party had to include at least one woman on their list, but they were not obliged to place their female candidates at the top of it. This means that the final number of women who stand to be represented in parliament is minimal. Of the 376 female candidates running for election, most of them are running independently and only 6% as part of a party or coalition, which is the reason why their situation gets even more difficult. No woman has obtained a seat in the first phase and no individual female candidate has made it to the second round.

OPEMAM: According to your experience, how are the voting days (28-29 November, 5-6 December) going?

BA: The first day ended with high participation, which decreased during the next day and the second round. According to the final official results, participation stood at 52%. It did not reach 80%, as the military expected, but was nevertheless rather high compared with previous elections. For example, participation stood at 40% in March's constitutional referendum. It is worth mentioning the large number of women exercising their right to vote in the polling stations. There were administrative irregularities from the beginning of the day (lack of ballot papers, lack of ink, etc.) as well as different parties handing out propaganda and gifts outside of polling stations. After the two first election days, the voting process was ordered to be repeated in different constituencies of Cairo and Alexandria due to court decisions. This will be take place on January 10th and 11th. The general lack of violence was remarkable, particularly considering the events taking place days prior to the elections and the fact that, under Mubarak's regime, acts of violence were common on election days. All political forces focused on the elections and forgot what happened in Tahrir just a few days before. The hundreds of young people who continued with the concentration in the square, most of who were disappointed with the political leaders, decided to move the concentration to the seat of the government to protest against the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces' choice of prime minister, Gamal Al Ganzouri - a politician linked to Mubarak - after the resignation of the previous civilian government, led by Essam Sharaf.

OPEMAM: Why do you think the Revolution Continues Alliance, which brings together revolutionary forces such as the Coalition of the Youth of the Revolution, has achieved such a poor outcome for the moment (3.5% through party lists, 1st phase)?

BA: The Revolution Continues Alliance is a coalition of several parties (7), including left-wing parties such as the Socialist Popular Alliance and the Egyptian Socialist Party, liberal parties such as the Free Egyptians Party and Islamic parties such as the Egyptian Trend Party, formed by a Muslim Brotherhood splinter group of young people. They were joined by some revolutionary groups created by young people who have protested in Tahrir since January 25 calling for the end of the regime, for example, the Coalition of the Youth of the

Revolution. Most of these groups have scarce financial resources and certain parties have found it hard to obtain the guarantees required to become an official political party. For this reason, they have not been able to conduct a constant campaign in the media, television or press, as other groups have done. Instead, they have used social networks which have not been enough, as these do not reach too many sectors of society. Besides, many of these groups' followers and supporters, and many young people linked to these platforms, decided not to vote in protest at the security forces' conduct and the violence used against the protesters until three days prior to the elections and also against the SCAF's decision not to cancel the elections despite the situation of instability and violence that the country was experiencing.

OPEMAM: Finally, if the results are confirmed and the party linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), wins half the Assembly, do you foresee a tug-of-war between the MB and the Military Junta regarding the much-debated supra-constitutional principles?

BA: We still have to wait for the outcome of the next two phases (if the electoral process is completed), although it seems evident that the Freedom and Justice Party will get a majority in the Parliament. It remains to be seen what coalitions and agreements are achieved at the end of the electoral process and also if the FJP members decide to reach an agreement with the liberal forces, such as the Egyptian Bloc, to draft the new Constitution. At the moment, these supra-constitutional principles are in a deadlock, although the recent creation of an Advisory Council by the SCAF seems to be aimed at supervising and controlling the drafting of the next Egyptian Constitution. Any attempt by the Military Junta to delegitimise the new Parliament, or attempt to control and supervise the drafting of the Constitution, will unleash tensions not only with the FJP but also with the rest of political forces and revolutionary youth formations.