

As Egypt enters election season, calls grow for political parties to unite

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Cairo

With Egypt set for presidential elections next year, municipal polls likely the year after and a parliamentary vote by 2020, there have been calls for the country's political parties to unite to avoid a chaotic election scene and the return of political Islam.

"There is an urgent need for the political parties to get stronger to be able to have a real presence on the streets," said MP Salah Hasaballah, head of the liberal Freedom Party. "There are so many parties on the political stage but few of them are influential."

The calls came as Egypt's presidential election heated up. Former Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq, founder of the Egyptian Patriotic Party, announced his intention to run. Human rights lawyer Khalid Ali has also announced he will seek the presidency but incumbent President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has not confirmed he will try for a second term in office, although most observers say he will.

Egypt's post-revolutionary political scene has been ruled by dozens of small, newly established parties, such as the Freedom Party, competing for relevance, ultimately fragmenting the Egyptian vote. Prior to the 2011 uprising that ended the rule of long-standing President Hosni Mubarak, there were 15 political parties in Egypt, including the ruling National Democratic Party, which was subsequently dissolved.

Although there are more than 100 parties in Egypt today, only 19 are represented in parliament. The

remaining parties have little presence on the Egyptian street and little prospect of winning many votes in elections.

Despite this, small parties are securing enough combined votes to swing an election. It is this fragmented politics that increased fears that Islamist parties could exploit the lack of cohesion. A number of officials, including Sisi have called for Egypt's political parties to unite.

"This is why I call on parties [sharing the same programmes and platforms] to merge with each other," Sisi said on the sidelines of the World Youth Forum in November. "This will make them more powerful."

Egyptian MP Ahmed Refaat had proposed a draft law eliminating all political parties that were not represented in the parliament.

"The 104 political parties in Egypt is considered high. It weighs down the political sphere in Egypt, so I have prepared articles for the suggested draft law," he told Egypt's Al Nahar TV. "Political parties that do not have any representatives inside the parliament and are still receiving funding from foreign countries are working to incite the public opinion against the government. The draft law would restrict the presence of such parties."

Despite outlawing the Muslim

Brotherhood and its political wing, the Freedom and Justice Party, a number of Islamist parties, including the Salafist Al-Nour party, operate in Egypt.

"This fear [of political Islam] is particularly credible given the fact that there are Islamist sleeper cells everywhere and new generations of Islamists who are ready to return to the political stage," said Saad al-Zunt, the head of Cairo think-tank Centre for Political Studies. "True, there is a crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliated terrorist organisations but we must know that this crackdown has only scorched the snake, not killed it."

Cairo has clamped down on politics in unregulated space, including proposing a youth institutions law that would ban members of public youth clubs and centres from engaging in political activity. There has been fear that Egypt's youth clubs were breeding grounds for Islamist ideology.

Among the parties that were formed after the 2011 uprising were a dozen Islamist, Salafist and semi-Islamist ones. Violence orchestrated and perpetrated by the followers of the Muslim Brotherhood and allied parties following Muhammad Morsi's 2013 ouster prompted a clampdown that landed most top Islamist leaders in jail or in exile.

In late 2014, Egypt disbanded the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party and dissolved Muslim Brotherhood charities – an important campaigning tool for the Islamist movement. Other Muslim Brotherhood-allied parties suspended their activities.

The ultra-orthodox Salafists escaped that fate by backing Morsi's ouster and campaigning for Sisi ahead of the 2014 presidential elections in Alexandria, their Medi-



Surprise comeback. A file picture shows former Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq attending a news conference in Cairo. (AFP)

terranean stronghold in northern Egypt.

Al-Nour, the largest of Egypt's Salafist parties, holds 12 of the 596 seats in parliament.

Political veterans said Sisi's invitation for the parties to unite or merge was logical. The absence of strong political parties that can field qualified candidates in parliamentary, presidential and municipal elections gives the public no alternatives to Islamists, who used the political vacuum present after the revolution to control the political stage, they added. The revolution allowed for the rise of the Islamist parties, especially the

Muslim Brotherhood, after decades of suppression and political marginalisation.

Nonetheless, there are challenges to civilian political parties uniting or merging, the political veterans said.

"The political parties are too diverse for their individual differences to be blurred to allow them to merge easily," said Hussein Abdel Razeq, a left-wing politician. "Some leaders of political parties consider the formation of their parties to be their greatest achievement in life, so it will be difficult to convince them to merge with other political entities."

Egypt mulls its options after failure of Nile dam talks

Ahmed Megahid

Cairo

After a breakdown in talks over Ethiopia's construction of a multi-billion-dollar hydroelectric dam that Egypt says would severely restrict its share of Nile waters, Cairo is mulling its options.

Representatives of the governments of Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan, after a meeting in November in Cairo, said they were unable to reach an agreement on the preliminary results of technical studies on the effects the dam would have on Egypt and Sudan.

The French firm that conducted the studies said the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam would have adverse effects on both countries. Ethiopia, however, rejected the results. Egyptian officials, fearing Addis Ababa could unilaterally start filling the dam reservoir, voiced stronger opposition to the dam's construction.

Ethiopia rejected Cairo's objections and said it had no intention to halt construction. "Construction has never stopped and will never stop until the project is completed," Ethiopian Minister of Irrigation Seleshi Bekele Awulachew said.

Ethiopian Ambassador to Egypt Taye Atske-Selassie Amde met with members of Egypt's African Affairs parliamentary committee to reassure Egyptian MPs about

the construction. Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn is to visit Cairo in December.

While Cairo has publicly ruled out military action and pledged to increase attempts to persuade the Ethiopians to return to negotiations and accept the technical studies, analysts were not optimistic.

"Ethiopia wants to fill the reservoir in three years," said Hossam al-Imam, spokesman for Egypt's Ministry of Irrigation, "but this would significantly reduce the amount of water coming to Egypt."

The Grand Renaissance dam has a storage capacity of 75 billion cubic metres. Egyptian specialists said that is more than needed for Ethiopia's electricity generation. Ethiopia wants to become a power generation hub in the Horn of Africa and plans to sell electricity generated by the dam to other countries.

To meet its timetable, Ethiopia would need to store 25 billion cubic metres of water in its reservoir every year for three years. This would have grave implications for Egypt, Cairo said.

Egypt receives 55.5 billion cubic metres of water from the Nile every year. With a population of 96 million, however, Egypt faces a water deficit of more than 30 billion cubic metres. A reduction of its Nile water share would exacerbate Egypt's woes.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi ramped up his rhetoric on the dam. "No one can touch Egypt's share of water," he said in

televised comments in mid-November. "We are capable of protecting our national security and water to us is a question of national security. Full stop."

"The issue of the Nile River is a life-or-death matter for Ethiopians, too," responded Ethiopian Foreign Ministry spokesman Meles Alem.

Egyptian officials said the country could suffer far-reaching socioeconomic problems if there is no solution to the water rights issue.

“By acting militarily to resolve the dam issue, Egypt risks angering its African brothers as well as the international community.”



Retired army General Mohamed al-Shahawi

A drop of 10 billion cubic metres of water would cost Egypt \$8 billion every year in lost farmland output and fish wealth, a study conducted by former Irrigation Minister Mahmud Abu Zeid said.

Apart from this, water shortages would mean that Egypt's High Dam, the hydroelectric power generation facility in Aswan, could go offline. Although the dam contributes less than 10% of Egypt's electricity capacity of 32,000 megawatts a year, the shortfall would cause daily brownouts and blackouts.

For every loss of 1 billion cubic metres of water of Egypt's annual Nile river share, there would be a 2% drop in the High Dam's electricity output, said Abdel Nabi Abdel Ghani, the former head of the dam's electricity plant.

To avoid these repercussions, Cairo must convince Ethiopia to fill its dam reservoir over a 10-year period, rather than three.

"Even this will have an impact but the effect, in this case, would be far less than if the reservoir is filled in three years," said Ministry of Irrigation spokesman Hossam al-Imam.

In March 2015, Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan signed a declaration of principles in which they pledged to cause no significant harm to the others in the use of the Nile. The declaration saw the three countries agree to contract an independent study of the dam's effects and abide by it. Cairo says Ethiopia has violated the declaration. Some officials argued that this was a stalling tactic by Addis Ababa as it sought

to complete construction of the dam.

There have been calls in Egyptian media for Addis Ababa to be taken to international court over alleged breach of the declaration. However, legal experts said this was unlikely to succeed and that what is needed was a political, not legal solution.

"The 2015 declaration of principles only allows the three countries to settle disputes over the dam through negotiation," said Ayman Salama, an international law professor at Cairo University. "This is why demanding arbitration is not a viable option."

The loss of farmland would exacerbate Egypt's food insecurity and possibly turn millions of farmers jobless and stifle agricultural expansion plans.

For Sisi, who has repeatedly described Egypt's share of Nile waters as a matter of "national security," the question is: What happens next?

With fears in Cairo regarding water security already high, there are calls for no options to be excluded if Ethiopia refuses to negotiate over the filling of the dam reservoir.

"Military action should not be excluded as an option in case negotiations reach a dead end," said retired army General Mohamed al-Shahawi. "We know that by acting militarily to resolve the dam issue, Egypt risks angering its African brothers as well as the international community but we have to defend our country's right to exist."