



Egypt's Islamist Parliament

The first Egyptian parliament following the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak was seated earlier this year in Cairo. Formed nearly a year after Mubarak stepped down and the previous parliament was dissolved, this legislative body will wield significant power and could initiate major shifts in relations with the United States and Israel. This has pundits and policymakers in both countries worried.

The new parliament is overwhelmingly dominated by Islamist parties, first and foremost the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), which won 47 percent of the seats. As the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, the FJP advocates implementing Islamic law in the political, social and economic spheres. The party has stated publicly that it intends to respect personal liberties and will focus on social and economic issues, but will gradually nudge the culture toward its conservative values.

Though the political strength of the Muslim Brotherhood has been well-known, what came as a surprise to many was the impressive showing of an even more fundamentalist Islamist group, the Salafist al-Nour party, which won 25 percent of the parliamentary seats. Salafists accept democracy only insofar as it is compatible with Islamic law and espouse rigid social codes, including complete gender segregation. They have spoken against the right of Egypt's Coptic Christians to run for public office and have attacked Coptic churches.

In terms of foreign policy, the Islamists' stated positions and rhetoric are troubling. The FJP says Egypt's 1979 peace treaty with Israel should be "revised." Its parent movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, opposes Israel's existence as a matter of religious doctrine and has close ties with the terrorist group Hamas, an offshoot of the Brotherhood. The Salafists follow the same doctrine and express views that are no less extreme.

Statements from Islamist leaders often betray blatant anti-Semitism. At a November rally in Cairo organized in cooperation with the Muslim Brotherhood, speakers made explicit calls for jihad and for "liberating" the whole of Palestine, citing an end-of-times prophecy attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, according to which Muslims will one day kill the Jews.

The Islamist parties will control both the agenda of Egypt's new legislature and the makeup of a body that will write the country's constitution, and thus shape the future of Egypt for generations to come.

They will likely also push for a much more aggressive foreign policy and stake positions at odds with the U.S. and Israel. Ultimately, this means that Washington will have to use its leverage to ensure that American interests do not suffer, including Egypt's peace treaty with Israel.