



POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN EGYPT: PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICE¹

Executive Summary

Introduction:

Political participation is one of the main characteristics of any process of political change, and essential to the democratic fiber of an engaged civil society. Egypt has been suffering from a lack of a real political participation for many decades. Even over the last four years since the ouster of Mubarak, whilst certain types of political engagement have increased, others have remained stubbornly low, whether as a result of negative citizen perceptions, government restrictions, or limited effectiveness.

This paper, after considering the range of conceptual definitions of political participation, aims to classify Egyptian citizens' engagement with formal and informal means of political participation. The findings are based on quantitative research in the form of a nationwide public opinion poll which aims to identify those activities that Egyptians identify most readily as political participation, and the impact these activities can have on Egypt's political scene. It offers a comparative angle between citizen engagement prior to and after the uprisings of January 2011, from the interim government under the Supreme Council of Armed Force (SCAF) to the government of Morsi and the incumbent regime of President El-Sisi.

A note on methodology:

The conclusions of this paper are based on a telephone survey carried out by Baseera, the Egyptian Center for Public Opinion Research in late November 2014.² The nationwide sample of 2027 respondents (aged 18 and over) was randomly selected and thereafter weighted to represent national demographics including population distribution across governorates in Egypt and gender proportion. The response rate was 44.2%, and the margin of error is calculated at 3 percentage points. Greater detail on the methodology can be found in the full report.

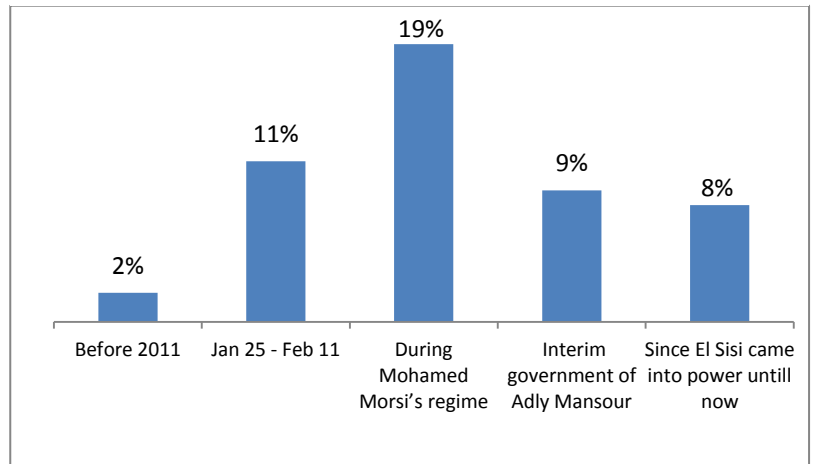
This study finds that Egyptians identify more readily with formal means of political participation than informal ones. Amongst the former we can count voting in elections and referendums as well as running for official political positions. Amongst the latter are to be found violent protests and demonstrations, sit-ins and civil disobedience.

¹ This research project has been funded by the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation as part the Masar Citizenship project looking at public opinion trends in Egypt. This project forms part of the broader Masar Programme designed to accompany the processes of political transition across the MENA region.

² The political nature of the survey topic and the restrictions imposed by the Egyptian authorities in carrying out quantitative political research ruled out the option of face-to-face polling.

The rate of citizen engagement in formal participation has traditionally been higher than engagement with informal means of participation, both before and since the January 25 uprisings. For the comparative element of the survey, participation in demonstrations and protests is taken as an example of informal political engagement, while voting in elections and referendums is taken as an example of formal engagement. *Figure 1* shows that at the informal level, Egyptians' participation was unsurprisingly very limited before 2011, it increased substantially after the revolution and it reached its peak during the June 30 demonstrations of 2013 under then-President Mohamed Morsi. It has since decreased but remains at much higher levels than under Mubarak, telling of ongoing citizen discontent with government policies but reduced political or public space in which to express it.

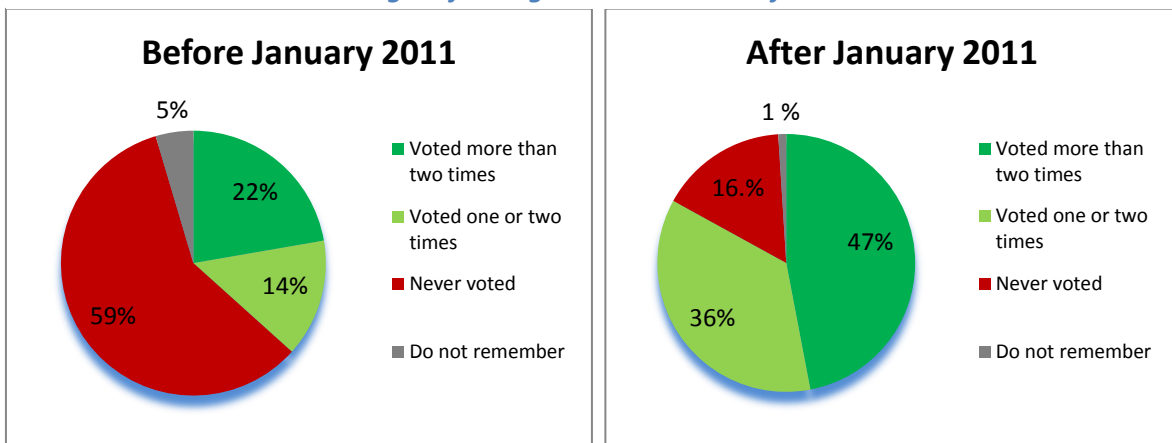
Figure 1
Egyptians' participation in demonstrations/protests in different five periods



ongoing citizen discontent with government policies but reduced political or public space in which to express it.

Figure 2

Percentages of voting in elections and referendums





Taking voting in referendums and elections as an example of formal political participation, *Figure 2* shows that before the revolution, only about 37% of Egyptians engaged in this process, whereas after the revolution, this number has practically doubled to 83%. Whilst a sense of entitlement and optimism in influencing political change features in this leap, an equally logical explanation lies in the parallel increase in political processes under Egypt's so-called Road Map since the 2011 uprisings, with citizens being called to the polls a total of eight times over the past four years whether for elections or constitutional referenda.

The current status of political participation in Egypt:

The frequency, scale and range of demonstrations as used to happen on a weekly basis following Mubarak's ouster have clearly decreased. However, sporadic protests have continued to take place between followers of specific political affiliations despite restrictions on political and public space imposed by the authorities. At the time of polling for instance, just after October 2014, many universities in Egypt were witnessing sit-ins and demonstrations organized by students and political movements for different reasons such as the demand for the freedom of their arrested colleagues. Only 7% of respondents claim to support these demonstrations, which reinforces the finding that perceptions of informal activities as political participation is minimal. On the other hand, and also at the time of polling when the parliamentary elections had been announced for March 2015, 63% of survey respondents were planning on voting preferring to engage within the framework of formal means of political participation.

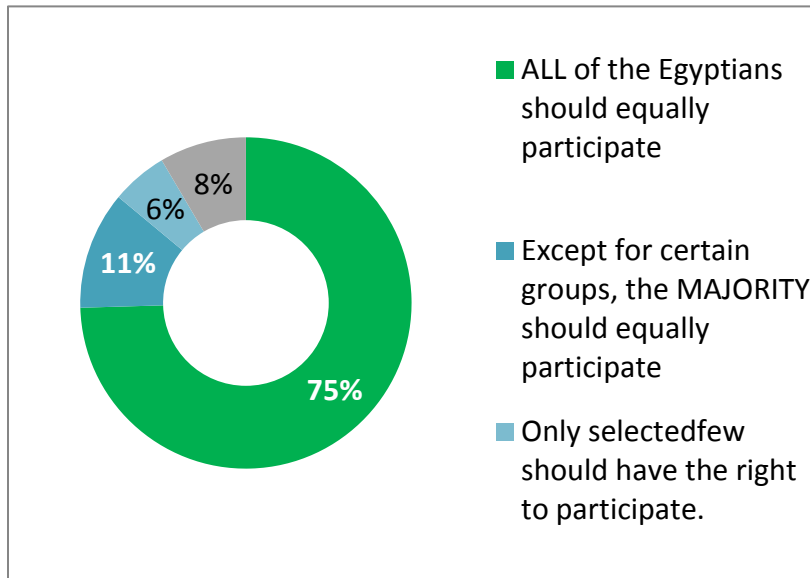
In terms of participation via expressing opinions on political issues, almost 70% of respondents claimed that the current regime gives people the space to freely express their opinions on political issues. Furthermore, compared to Mubarak's era, the majority of Egyptians see that there is more room for people now to participate in political spheres. This perception contrasts significantly with reports by human rights NGOs, both national and international, which highlight the clampdown on political space and the restrictions faced by opposition activists in expressing dissenting views or positions.

Dynamics of discrimination and inclusion:

When asked to what extent they agree that all Egyptians should have the same right of political participation regardless of gender, social level, religion or political affiliation, almost 75% of respondents supported this statement (see *figure 4 below*). The minority who believe that certain groups should be excluded were divided between excluding former members of the National Democratic Party (NDP), members of the Muslim brotherhood (MB), and members of Salafi groups. This contrasts with widespread national media narratives fanning the flames of exclusionary dynamics of the Brotherhood and any related organizations from many forms of political and social life.

Figure 3

Egyptians' opinion about political exclusion



With regards to discrimination on the grounds of gender, 83% of respondents agree or strongly agree that women should have the same right as men to run for parliamentary elections. More surprisingly, 73% of men agree that women should enjoy this right without any discrimination, almost as high as the percentage of female respondents who support this statement.

Conclusion

Effective political participation is an important element of any healthy democratic state, and ideally the authorities should encourage, or at least respect, the right of citizens to engage in different forms of political participation, whether formal or informal, conventional or unconventional, structural or non-structural. Based on the results of Baseera's survey, it can be concluded that Egyptians are more likely to identify with formal means of political participation than informal ones, and voting in elections and referendums is the activity with the highest level of engagement amongst citizens. This study also concludes that Egyptians overwhelmingly agree that all citizens have the right to participate in political affairs, regardless of gender, political affiliation, or religion. Finally, the majority of respondents voiced an optimistic view about political participation in the near future as they expect the level of participation in Egypt to increase over the next four years. It remains to be seen whether citizen perceptions as polled in this survey will help shape political reality in Egypt or whether political developments will cause perceptions to shift further down the line.