

TRANSCRIPT
Podcast #19: Elections!
Cairo, Egypt
November 28, 2011

Participants: Ursula Lindsey and Issandr El Amrani.

(INTRO MUSIC)

LINDSEY: Hello, it's November 28h. Welcome to The Arabist podcast, this is Ursula Lindsey, and today it is me and Issandr El Amrani.

EL AMRANI: Hi.

LINDSEY: And . . . just the two of us, we're one man down.

EL AMRANI: But today is elections day in Egypt. We've been spending the day going around to various polling stations around Cairo, and seeing how this process that all of us only a day or so ago were worrying about being a looming disaster, the scenes of chaotic Mad Max-like violence, and it didn't turn out to be.

LINDSEY: Well, it's still the early days. I myself, I'm a little bit, still waiting for the other shoe to drop, but I am very happy. I think we are all happy and relieved that it seems to be going better than expected. A lot of people I spoke to were concerned with violence, which traditionally there is violence between candidate supporters.

EL AMRANI: And there has been some, I think.

LINDSEY: There has been some. There's been logistical problems which we of course foresaw, I think we've discussed this at some length. There were judges who arrived very late, there are polling stations that never got their ballots, there's one report of a polling station where the judge was held hostage by the voters because they were so angry that the ballots never arrived. There have been instances--there was one candidate who pulled a gun out at a polling station, there's been reports of some clashes between candidate supporters. And most disturbing, there's been a few reports of candidates filling out ballots for voters. That's, that's the most disturbing. But the thing is, there are a lot of monitors, not that many international ones, but many domestic ones, and they're putting up all sorts of information about infractions, which is great. The question is, whether they'll be addressed in any way.

EL AMRANI: The parties are also putting up statements and the Muslim Brotherhood Party - the Freedom and Justice Party - has been issuing press releases throughout the day about things they have seen, statements also about the accusations, many accusations against themselves, for distributing leaflets close to the entrance of polling

stations, which is illegal. And of course, they have also their own grievances against parties that have broadcast advertising on the radio and elsewhere.

LINDSEY: Ok, it seems like--

EL AMRANI: All this, all this minor stuff. Lets remember that only a year ago, a year ago today in fact, the beginning of the 2010 parliamentary elections, which were a complete disaster, you had massive use of vote buying, massive police collusion with the candidates of the ruling party . .

LINDSEY: Blockading stations and so forth.

EL AMRANI: In certain areas you had . . and just the way elections were run under Mubarak generally, which you often had the authorities, the state, colluding with a particular candidate of the ruling party . . the vote counting process, of course we haven't gotten to that stage yet as we record this today, but the vote counting process which was highly dubious in some cases. So, so far, what we've seen is an election that despite having been really tremendously badly prepared, is going okay. They've had to extend voting time, they've had to create another day of voting. It's gonna last the next six weeks at least, but we have an election that at least doesn't take place in an atmosphere of violence or riots or big confrontations between the police and citizens.

(CROSSTALK)

LINDSEY: Or fraud, fraud so far. I mean, certainly the turnout itself--and the turnout itself is the biggest difference--so before the elections, me and you have covered elections here for 10 years, you'd go to polling stations and they'd be empty. There would be almost nobody voting, there'd be a busload of government employees or employees of one of the candidates that were going to be bused in at some point during the day. Today there are lines going around the block. The turnout itself is a sign that people want to trust the process, they want to believe that it's different this time. They have faith in it, although it is still being logistically administered by the Ministry of Interior in collaboration with the army. The army seems to be doing as much, if not more, of the securing of the polling stations and the police--

EL AMRANI: I certainly saw today more army uniforms than police uniforms guarding stations and I think the events of the last week . . which, you know, bizarrely is how news coverage changes I suppose, but they seem far away now, the events of last week and the dramatic action that we saw in Tahrir Square. You know, because of what happened last week they didn't want, perhaps, too many police officers, especially in Cairo where a lot of the participants in Tahrir are from.

LINDSEY: Yeah, I mean, it is hard to see how they would be trusted mediators or enforcers of order if the problem arose given the mistrust and the hostility that a lot of people feel towards them. But it seems so far, so good as a process. I mean, it could have been organized much much better. One of the reasons that the lines are so long is

of course that it wasn't organized well. People take quite a bit of time to vote because they have these enormous ballots with tons of choices and they don't understand the process, and they even have to - before they even get to the polling station - figure out which polling station to go. Many people have been reassigned to new polling stations and we saw, and mentioned this in the blog, we saw in the neighborhood of Sayeda Zeinab in Cairo, which is sort of lower middle class neighborhood, three of these street-side Muslim Brotherhood offices they had set up with a few guys with laptops collecting, you know, people could come up with their IDs and the guys would enter their ID number and tell them which polling station to go vote in, which is a very useful service. I myself, I am a bit troubled by the fact that the state should have been doing this service and not, as usual, letting the Islamists step into the breach.

EL AMRANI: Exactly. Having members of a party or people associated with a major party be the ones who direct people on where they can vote is yet another example of how the state has failed to provide these basic services that they should be providing to citizens. I mean, yes they provided a website, and I think there's a telephone service to find out where you can vote but--

LINDSEY: But judging from the number of people who are going up asking where they should vote, obviously those services either don't work or weren't publicized enough because half the people in front of every polling station were asking, you know, is this the right one? is this where I am supposed to be?

EL AMRANI: Mm-hum.

LINDSEY: So clearly that was . . . although, again, that's an issue--I think what you have to give credit to is, I mean, you can either say the patience and the goodwill or the low expectations of the Egyptian voter, but what's made the process work is also how much people are willing to put up with.

EL AMRANI: Of course, I mean people are staying in line, queuing for four or five, six, seven hours today. That's really quite amazing. Having argued for a while now, and warned since last June at least, that these elections need to be prepared well, that the foundation, which will be the foundation of the next steps in Egypt's transition, should be irreproachable, and being very disappointed by the fact that everything was quite slapdash as we explain in previous podcasts. I do think that what is a miracle about today, other than the atmosphere is so different than the elections under the Mubarak regime, is that there is a sense of enthusiasm and of confidence, that I think not in the system, but lets say, confidence in the future, or wanting to participate in shaping their own future by the Egyptian people. I think that is what's really quite touching about today, quite moving today. These people wanting to, you know, especially in the context of what happened last week in Tahrir, at this time of national crisis and delegitimization of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces - SCAF - of these questions being raised, is Egypt on the right path?-- that people still came out, and perhaps because of that, people still came out and said: okay, my vote is important, I want this to count. And the

question here for me is not one of . . . [emergency siren wails outside] . . . we have some police outside.

LINDSEY: I think it's an ambulance.

EL AMRANI: The question for me is not one of whether . . . of whether the results will be good ones, you know, if the NDP is going to do really well, if the Muslim Brotherhood are going--

LINDSEY: Well the former NDP.

EL AMRANI: The former NDP, yes.

LINDSEY: The former ruling party.

EL AMRANI: The remnant's party is the *felools* . . . are going to do really well, or Islamists, Salafists, the Muslim Brotherhood and others will do really well, although I think that's part of what's motivating people to vote, but it's about having ownership of this transition process that's gone astray, of reclaiming a right to a voice in it. I think people did it in Tahrir last week and are doing it at the polling stations this week.

LINDSEY: And you've pointed out that one, that the transition process has been, you know, quite flawed so far, and two, what I think is important to remember is that we're not really sure what the powers of this parliament will actually be. And that, you know, the constitutional declaration that currently rules the country in fact gives SCAF precedence over parliament in pretty much everything.

EL AMRANI: This is a very important point I think for people to remember, and I'm not sure that . . . I don't see discussed usually in the Egyptian media, that I have not seen brought forward by political leaders. The next parliament has the duty of forming the constitutional assembly that will write the next constitution of this country. Although, whether it appoints all of the hundred members of that assembly or not, and whether there's any restrictions on that is still uncertain because this is part of what the debate over the supra-constitutional principles that were part of the sparks for last week's protests were about. But other than that, it is very much the same type of parliament that existed under Hosni Mubarak. It is very much the parliament of a hybrid presidential constitution, of a hybrid presidential system, but in which, arguably, SCAF compared to the president has even more powers as defined under the constitutional declaration that had passed after the March referendum. It has veto power over legislation, it has the ability still to rule by decree, so my reading of that - I'm no constitutional lawyer - but is a simple one: it can create laws without having to get them approved by parliament. I'm not sure that there exists mechanisms, reading the constitutional declaration, for parliament itself to overturn a presidential, or rather, a SCAF decision, or force through legislation entirely by itself in the way that the American system Congress with two-thirds of the votes can overturn a presidential veto.

LINDSEY: I'm sure, I mean, I assume that SCAF's view of the what the parliament's power is going to be is quite limited. And the thing is, it's the balance of powers or the powers have been left purposely somewhat ambiguous. And I think what we'll see, I mean, the argument, and especially the argument of the Islamists has been: we need to focus on the elections, we need to go through with the elections because elections will give us the popular legitimacy, there will be another institution in the country that has legal, popular, electoral legitimacy, and then we can make the changes that need to be done, whether it is pushing for presidential elections, making sure they are held this year, you know, challenging SCAF, at least making sure there's a transfer to civilian governance. But in fact, all of this will have to be negotiated and people are going to put pressure on parliament after electing it to do certain things. The people are going to have expectations for parliament and that may also pressure parliament to have expectations for SCAF and push for things. But it is a serious question, how much they can actually accomplish, and the people, the small minority of activists and protestors and revolutionary youth groups who are very critical of the elections, and some of whom are abstaining . . . this is their argument, that it's meaningless to have a parliament under the current circumstances, under SCAF's authority, when all the reforms we have asked for still haven't happened, you are just being co-opted, you're just legitimizing them. And this is very very much a minority view, but there is some grain of truth to it, I think.

EL AMRANI: Yeah, I don't support the boycott although I understand--

(CROSSTALK)

LINDSEY: I don't either. I don't think it works as a strategy, but I understand--

EL AMRANI: Understand its rationale. And the thing with the boycott is that if you are going to pursue a boycott you don't do it two days before the elections. You need to start a campaign towards the boycott. A boycott's aim is delegitimizing an election, so you need to, on the one hand, try and do the work to persuade the people to adhere to the boycott and not vote, and you need to get political parties behind it. I mean, it's not even that, let's say, the split over the boycott was over the secular-Islamist divide or something like that. No single party has suggested a boycott. A few people near the, close to the Revolution Continues electoral alliance suggested it.

LINDSEY: Some candidates, I heard, had suspended their campaigns during the events in Tahrir and have kept them suspended, although that kept changing at the last minute with candidates announcing and denying that they had suspended their campaigns.

EL AMRANI: So they only have themselves to blame. The lack of preparation for a boycott, if they were going to be serious about it, has rendered it meaningless.

LINDSEY: It was also something that developed quite recently because it developed partly out of the violence and the clashes in Tahrir in the last ten days. I mean, it was . . . they were always sort of reluctantly or hesitantly involved in the electoral process and then when these clashes with the army and police happened in Tahrir they said: no, it's

pointless to engage in elections when we are still under these conditions. So it was partly a last minute response. But I agree it doesn't work. I think what would work much better - and there were suggestions of this, but I didn't see anybody doing this - was that people would go to polling stations wearing black armbands that said "in solidarity with the martyrs" or "against military rule" and--

EL AMRANI: There's been a lack of frankly serious ideas and leadership by the political class throughout all of last week's trouble in Tahrir . . . you know, it was driven really by the protestors themselves, and the protestors were very much locked in the moment and in a posture of confrontation with the police, and the military first and foremost. And there wasn't much thought, I thought, to the larger picture. And you can see how there remains a large divide between the political parties and the political class and the protest movement writ large. Furthermore, perhaps a boycott was never really a convincing option in Egypt, if only . . . if you look at the Coptic situation. I mean, the fact is Copts are going to vote, almost all of them are going to vote. You'll find very few Copts who will boycott this election because what is at stake for them is their entire lifestyle and their fear of Islamists coming and so on. And this is a ten, fifteen percent block of votes in the Egyptian electorate, and you can't really, you couldn't have really persuaded them otherwise unless the church itself was involved of course and urging a boycott. The entire transition has taken place and the road up to the elections with the electoral law being decided at the very last minute, and the arguments over which system to adopt, and ending up at this bad compromise of a two-thirds list base, one-third individual candidate based system, the last minute redistricting, the last minute publishing of candidate lists, the general lack of, the really staggering lack of organization of the government--

LINDSEY: The unresolved questions going forward over how votes will be counted, which is a huge issue, and I keep hearing the judges themselves, in many cases, do not really understand how the vote counting process needs to proceed, because it is very complex, there's these different categories, and certain . . . you have to fill these professional quotas, I mean, the judges themselves . . . and the proportional representation system on the list has to be counted in certain ways. So the vote counting is a huge problem going forward, when the elections results are going to be announced has not been made clear. Are we going to hear after every round? or are we only going to hear at the end? And with this extension of two days, how exactly are the ballots going to be secured overnight? You hear different accounts of how that is going to take place, and how the judges are going to put wax seals on the door and the ballot box, or they're all going to transferred to some place and guarded by police or guarded by the army. I mean, that is something you could come up with a credible solution for, how the ballots are going to be guarded overnight, if you hadn't decided to extend voting to two days, one day before elections started, when everybody told you it was going to take two days, given turnout and given your man power. Everybody told you it would take two days six months ago.

EL AMRANI: Yeah.

LINDSEY: This is the thing--

EL AMRANI: This is . . . In a way we must be confusing our listeners because we are telling them we'd be against a boycott, but we're saying there's all these problems with the elections.

(CROSSTALK)

EL AMRANI: In an unsatisfactory situation that I think Egyptians find themselves in and they have to deal with the reality that is before them, and the risk if there was a serious boycott movement, which I'm thinking there isn't, although of course, I don't think the participation rate will be much higher than 50 percent or so. If there was a real boycott, they'd still be possibly stuck with the Brotherhood, former NDP dominated parliament while all the rest boycotted or something like that.

LINDSEY: Well, that's exactly what I heard candidates in the new liberal and secular parties say: our back is against the wall, we can't afford to sit it out, we'll end up with the former regime and the Muslim Brotherhood dominated parliament. And I think that's the way voters feel too: we can't afford to sit it out, there's too much at stake. So yeah, everybody has sort of been put in a position where they have to participate in a flawed process because it's the best option there, to participate in some way. And I think what's troubling is, given the optimism, the patience, the resolve that we saw of people today to vote, you know, I hope that they get . . . I hope that the institution that is created out of this is actually credible and can actually respond to their demands at all. It would be terrible for people to go out with this level of hope in democratic change and then find themselves with a completely unempowered, fractured parliament that actually can't do anything for them.

EL AMRANI: And that's the kind of battle that we saw around Tahrir. I'm not talking about the stone and tear grenades, but the political battle that we saw around Tahrir last week about . . . that was largely not actually about the election, but that was about SCAF's powers, about the transition schedule, the transition plan and order in which you do things. But maybe it is suspended now because people are focusing on the elections, but the debate still very much rages. We have this new government, well it's not really a government, it's a new prime minister who will form a new government later. There's going to be a lot of opportunities even as soon as after the first round of elections if we do see a large swing, lets say, in favor of the Muslim Brothers, or not, or their failure perhaps, who knows. I think even by the end of this week, there's a chance that this will create a new dynamic where the political parties that do well out of this will already have been in a position to pressure SCAF for a position in the cabinet, for a greater voice in the scheduling of the transition. So this battle is not over. I think it is shifting somewhere else, unless we get an election result that really favors political forces that are not interested in confronting SCAF. And here we have a big question mark on the favorite of this election - the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party - because the Muslim Brotherhood has backed SCAF's position essentially in the last week, but at the same time is very critical of SCAF, very critical of its attempts to

impose these supra-constitutional principles and other things. We are not sure where the Muslim . . . you know, at the end of this process, lets say the Muslim Brotherhood does well, we spoke to a candidate today who thought that the Democratic Alliance, which is the Muslim Brotherhood's electoral alliance, which I think about 80, 90 percent of its members are from Freedom and Justice--

LINDSEY: It's completely dominated by the Brotherhood.

EL AMRANI: You know, a study expected 50 percent, I thought that was a bit of bluster. A lot of people expect 20 percent, 30 percent, the more optimistic ones, 40 percent.

LINDSEY: I have people tell me they expect all Islamists combined to approach 50 percent, so the Muslim Brotherhood plus some more extremist Islamist groups.

EL AMRANI: But it is very hard to predict these election results, but lets say the Muslim Brotherhood does well, what's its choice then? What will it do? The SCAF has already conceded a shortened transition to civilian rule. Will it now decide to work with SCAF? Will it decide to work to put the pressure on SCAF?

LINDSEY: It will do what it always does. It will do both.

EL AMRANI: Hm-hum.

LINDSEY: It'll take advantage of any leverage it can get from protests, from opposition movements, from its own base, and at the same time it will negotiate. I think, unfortunately, what we've seen in the last few months, Muslim Brotherhood candidates and supporters--I've met many of them--they are average, respectable people, but the party's overriding strategy seems to be really about getting into power. I mean, playing the role it believes it deserves to play in running the country finally, they think their turn has come and they should really be in charge, be significantly in charge. So I think what they're going to spend . . . when they get into parliament their number one priority is going to be negotiating the presidential elections with SCAF, figuring out how influential they can be in the new system. We heard from somebody saying that they might try and make the system more of a parliamentary than a presidential system if they do well in the elections, figuring they will always be a big presence in parliament.

EL AMRANI: That is the position of Islamists elsewhere, for instance the En-Nahda party in Tunisia does favor a parliamentary system because it knows, at least for the foreseeable future, it is going to do well in elections. It has a good national network compared to the other parties. That's the same position that the Muslim Brotherhood finds itself in. But since no one expects a clear majority for the Brotherhood alone--

LINDSEY: But close to one, possibly, for the Islamist forces.

EL AMRANI: Yes, but I am not sure if the Muslim Brotherhood would like to team up with the Salafists and create an Islamist block as opposed to forming a more centrist

alliance with people, perhaps the Wafd party, the 'Adl party, the Wasat, ones that don't mind necessarily the religious conservatism so much, maybe even more into the liberal side of the spectrum, even I think, you know, it depends on what platform this alliance would be based, and then use that to lead basically a broad alliance for accelerated transition, for a better transition. It could do that or it could decide, okay what's next now? the presidential issue? do we have a shot at--if not having one of our own becoming president and being kingmakers--for the next president, what can we get out of that? But I don't know. Perhaps were probably getting ahead of ourselves, and over the next few weeks there's going to be a lot of opportunities to talk about results with actual data. That's one of the great things about these elections, as slow as they are, they'll be the best polling data on the political spectrum in Egypt that this country will ever have received.

LINDSEY: Which is another reason why the higher the turnout the better. I mean, it's really key that as many people as possible come out because then you really get a sense of Egyptian society in its entirety. And somebody said, this human rights activist said on Twitter today, among the many comments on the elections, that the people have shown that they are ready for elections, the state has shown it hasn't. And I think it is nice to walk around Cairo and see people so excited to have these choices to exercise, but lets also hope that in the weeks and months to come, as this process drags on, that it remains unmarred by serious violence and by fraud, and that the next time it is done better.

EL AMRANI: Yeah, but I think people aren't quite ready for the next new dynamic that's going to come. When the results come out it is going to significantly change the mood one way or the other. I mean certainly, if the Brothers are underperforming, if others are underperforming, they will want to try harder, and if the Brothers are over performing you are going to see a certain amount of panic in Coptic circles, in liberal elite circles . . . you know, even with the . . . our local in Garden city, the guy who sells me beer and wine, he has a juice shop, he also does the alcohol, and he was kidding around with me when I asked him if he went to vote. He said he voted for the Muslim Brothers and I was kind of puzzled and I said "oh really? but why?" --he says: oh you know, because they'll ban beer - but you sell beer! and he kept me going along and finally he said he was kidding with me: are you kidding? I don't want these Islamists, the Salafists or Muslim Brothers in power, they'll make me ride a horse and I'll have to swing swords just like the medieval times . . . and stuff like that. He had these very cliché concepts of the Muslim Brotherhood, but this is a big split. There are a lot of people, and this guy is muslim by the way, who fear that . . . it's not necessarily the exact policies of the Muslim Brotherhood, but the shock that the Muslim Brotherhood represents to the system. What it means for tourism, what it means for the relationship with the west--

LINDSEY: Women.

EL AMRANI: What it means for women. And you know, I personally have a lot of admiration for the Muslim Brotherhood in its organizational ability. What we saw in the get-out-the-vote effort today was really quite something, and I think there are a lot of

rather stupid complaints from liberals that are basically to sum up: oh the Muslim Brotherhood, it's so unfair, they're so much more organized than we are. And you know, no, don't complain, be more organized yourself. If someone could pay, I think some of these new parties might want to pay a lot of money to someone to work with the Muslim Brotherhood to come and teach them some of their tricks. I think in the next few weeks as the results come out, we are going to see these big questions being asked inside of Egypt, by Egypt's neighbors, Israeli in particular, by the United States. Whether those questions are about the Muslim Brotherhood or about maybe a surprising return of politicians associated with the former regime, or just about a very fragmented political map that you are not clear where it is headed, where everyone did okay, but no one did great.

LINDSEY: Yeah, well, we'll have to see and as soon as we have any news, which we should have some news on the individual races by Wednesday. Right? Hopefully, if counting doesn't take too long then we can start parsing some results. And there are some very high profile races, so it will be interesting to see.

EL AMRANI: But remember, even the results that we should get on Wednesday only cover the individual candidate races for the first round, which basically amounts to about a sixth of the next parliament.

LINDSEY: The other thing that's interesting is how, as the elections proceed, that will influence the actual, how the results, if the results are released sort of along the way, how the knowledge of those results will affect then the rest of the electoral process. Like you say, if people get the feeling that a certain party is winning or doing really well, you know, there might be reactions to that. You might see people come out to vote more to try and keep somebody out. It is interesting to have it spread out over such a long period of time. I think it sort of makes it a tense and unpredictable process to have it spread out like that because you don't just go vote and then get the results a few days later. It just goes on and on, and then there's run-off races between candidates if neither, if nobody gets 50 percent, and those tend to become very acrimonious and sometimes violent. I think that will be interesting to see, will be to follow some of the run-offs.

EL AMRANI: Alright. Well, stay tuned for the next Arabist podcast. Remember you can always write to us at podcast (at) arabist (dot) net. Also, if you can, go to arabist (dot) net (slash) donate, and help us keep these podcasts and the blog going. And we'll be back next week.

LINDSEY: Bye-bye.