Political Parties' Guide to Building Coalitions

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Building Coalitions in Egypt:

Structure, management and challenges

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Since 2011, Egypt has witnessed several elections with the participation of new political parties established following the January 25 revolution. Those new parties, as well as old ones in the process of restructuring, were forced to run for election by forming coalitions and alliances.

The concept of electoral alliances re-emerged after the January 25 revolution with the 2011 parliamentary elections. This resulted in the formation of four main alliances: the Democratic Alliance led by the Freedom and Justice Party and joined by Al-Karamah Party; the Islamic Alliance led by Al-Noor Party and other parties that were based on Scientific Salafism or Jihadist Salafism; the Egyptian Bloc Alliance led by the Egyptian Democratic Party and the Free Egyptians Party, and the Revolution Continues Alliance that included the Popular Alliance, Egypt Freedom Party and the Egyptian Current[1].

Though the context is now different in 2014, there are some similarities between the alliances that were formed in 2011 and alliances that are currently being established. In 2011, the Democratic Alliance mainly aimed at confronting remnants of Mubarak's regime, as the Muslim Brotherhood was considered a faction that actively took part in the January 25 revolution. However, current alliances fear the return of Islamists out of concern over the civil nature of the Egyptian state, which means that in both cases the main idea behind forming alliances is to exclude a certain group or faction and to defeat it in the elections. This results from the growing polarization between civil political movements and political Islam. Another similarity is the experience of the Free Egyptians Party in 2014 which resembles that of Al-Wafd Party in 2011; as the Free Egyptians Party has not yet announced if it will join any electoral alliance or not, and it seems more likely that it will be running for election on its own, especially given that the party's financial resources are capable of financing its electoral campaign. It also possesses its own media channels and tools that helped the Egyptian Bloc alliance back in the 2011 elections to achieve remarkable victories. In light of this, the party is expected to mainly focus on running for individual parliamentary seats.

Turning to the differences between electoral alliances in 2011 and 2014, the new parliamentary elections law is the most significant of these differences. In 2011, the existing political forces and parties participated in drafting the parliamentary elections law that ultimately resulted in the dissolution of parliament after the Supreme Constitutional Court declared it to be unconstitutional, while the current 2014 law was drafted without true consensus between different political parties. Despite the fact that all political parties have expressed their objection to the law, especially parties in the Civil Democratic Alliance who submitted several objections and suggestions to the legislative reform committee, apparently there is no intention of changing or amending the current law. Political Parties are now dealing with it as a "fait accompli" and have decided to form new electoral alliances.

Another difference is the nature of the political system introduced by the 2014 constitution. The current constitution has adopted a mixed political system, closer to a semi-presidential system, which grants political parties a bigger role within the parliament through approving the government chosen by the President or through choosing a new government of the party that won the plurality of seats. This point takes us to a more important one: if the alliances formed in 2011 were relatively acceptable after the January 25 revolution in light of political parties' desire to achieve the revolution's goals, which meant that they were prepared to tolerate contradictions within the alliances, will these contradictions also be tolerated in the 2014 elections under a mixed political system? Will political parties be able to carry out their functions under the current election law?2

In this context, 2014 electoral alliances will be facing challenges on three different levels. The first level is building alliances; the second level is managing them; and the third level is the surrounding political environment affecting their functioning.

First level: Building alliances

All political parties will have to deal with the dilemma of choosing their allies, as clearly evidenced by the history of political alliances in Egypt, beginning in 1984 when the Al-Wafd Party and the Muslim Brotherhood allied, then later in 1987 decided to end their alliance due to a number of problems. On top of these problems was the withdrawal of many members from the Al-Wafd Party who accused the Muslim Brotherhood of not abiding by the alliance's goals. Another alliance was formed between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Labour Party, which resulted a kind of merger between the parties that was soon destroyed by internal conflict. Thus, formation of alliances between parties with different backgrounds and ideologies usually ends in failure. The same happened in the 2011 parliament with the Democratic Alliance that was formed between the Freedom and Justice Party and other civil parties; the reason for this is the weakness of some political parties that try to join or ally with relatively strong parties in order to achieve electoral gains, regardless of resemblance or differences between those parties. The same applies to the Egyptian Bloc Alliance of 2011 that included parties with contradictory economic programs in the name of an alliance of civil parties. This led to a lack of coordination between their members within the parliament. All of this raises questions about the criteria according to which political parties choose their allies.

In light of interviews with some members of political parties and through the experiences of previous alliances we can identify a number of common selection criteria for allies:

> • Political context and environment prior to forming (see above).

> • Resemblance between ideas and programmes. This was demonstrated by the Revolution Continues List which refused to join the Egyptian Bloc. The main criterion on which it chose its allies was the support for the revolution's goals and its main goal was to prove itself different from other established political parties. This was also clear in the experience of the Al-Noor Party that formed the Islamic alliance in 2011.

> • Choosing strong parties regardless of agreeing or disagreeing with their policies, which was the case in the Democratic Alliance that was formed between the Freedom and Justice Party and the Al-Karamah Party in 2011.

From previous experience, we can state that political parties with similar programmes and policies are more likely to succeed, which means that there must be some sort of a preliminary political alliance between parties included when forming an Electoral alliance. This means having a consensus over political priorities that allows those parties to keep functioning together within the parliament and to ratify laws that serve people's interests.

Choosing political allies is also closely affected by the party's grassroots. Political parties experience serious objections from their grassroots if they enter alliances with other political parties that do not share the same visions and priorities. In such cases political parties try to convince their grassroots of the need to rearrange their priorities to enter into an alliance. Al-Wafd Party has tried to convince its grassroots of the importance of entering an electoral alliance in light of the current critical situation and of not repeating the 2011 experience by competing in the elections on its own in order to effectively face the danger of the Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Noor Party has also tried to convince its grassroots of the importance of preserving national interests through joining an electoral alliance that doesn't comprise Islamist parties supporting former President Mohammad Morsi and rejecting the current political process. The Civil Democratic Alliance that has backed Hamdeen Sabahi in the presidential elections is facing some difficulties in joining alliances because some of the current alliances include a number of parties that supported President Abdulfattah al-Sisi.

In most political parties, youth wings adopt a negative position concerning alliances suggested by the leaders and believe they consist of opportunistic initiatives, as they possess a more principled and less flexible vision. But during the last two years youth wings failed to impose their vision for alliances except for the youth wings in the Revolution Continues Alliance, which were relatively successful given the surrounding difficulties and whose success could be built on.

Second level: Management of alliances:

Despite the fact that elections should represent an opportunity for political parties to present their programmes, the weakness of political parties in Egypt and their lack of communication with the citizens in addition to their focus on forming electoral alliances has affected political parties' ability to draft electoral programmes, especially in cases when these political parties decided to form alliances with other parties whose programme contradicts theirs. This is why they have resorted to general visions and not detailed programs and agreed in principle on using slogans of the January 25 and June 30 revolutions.

Also despite parties usually sharing a common vision about how to run the coalition, their vision usually lacks mechanisms to resolve disputes. Withdrawing from the alliance is in itself considered as a mechanism which political parties resort to when facing unresolved issues that hinders the continuation of the alliance. Also, political parties leaderships prefer to personally deal with disputes, which proves that political parties in Egypt mainly depend on the personalities/leaders, not programmes.

The main issue of dispute between parties in a coalition is usually selecting their candidates. This is mainly due to the era of the Mubarak regime, which was marked by the dominance of the National Democratic Party (NDP), the banning of any space for political activity in Egypt, and the weakening of political parties. Thus, political parties that emerged after the January 25 revolution have not had

the chance to test their cadres in parliamentary work. They also have to convince parties in their coalition that their members are entitled to advanced positions on the list. What is further complicating matters is the fact that certain groups must be represented in the candidacy list according to the new 2014 elections law. Al-Noor Party, for example, is facing difficulties in selecting Coptic candidates, while all parties face problems in identifying disabled candidates; this is why many parties are forming special committees to select candidates based on certain criteria that include: efficiency, good reputation, public figures… etc. The selection of candidates might lead to the breaking up of the alliance or to defections within political parties if members do not abide by the political party's decisions, especially since the current law prevents changing the political affiliation according to which members were elected.

Political parties also face other challenges, for example in the 2011 elections law a proportional list system was adopted, which led to disputes between parties about placing their candidates on top of the list to guarantee that they are represented in parliament. However this has changed with the new law introducing an absolute closed list system, but it also means that parties risk losing the whole list if they lose. Finally, it is worth mentioning that the law distributing electoral constituencies is not yet finalised which is causing confusion for the new alliances, i.e. political parties can't decide whether their candidates will run for individual seats or as part of the list.

On the other hand alliances are not facing difficulties in appointing official spokesmen or choosing slogans for the campaign, but whereas some political parties are keen on prominently showing their names as the strongest party in the alliance, other parties are keen on joining alliances which include prominent strong parties. Finally each political party has its own reasons for joining the alliance and their degree of abiding by the alliance's rules and decisions varies. Most of the time the grassroots are the ones who do not abide by the agreed upon principles.

Third level: Environment surrounding alliances

The current law represents an obstacle for the political parties and hinders them from achieving proper representation within the parliament as it provides for a majority of individual seats along with a minority of seats to be elected according to an absolute closed list system. The explanation used to support this is that political parties are weak and incapable of reaching out to society. However, it must be noted that the State is responsible for strengthening political parties, as their strength is derived from actual practice. Most of the current political parties are newly formed and emerged after the January 25 revolution. This does not deny the fact that they have made a number of mistakes. With this law political parties are forced to join alliances, as it makes it hard for them to run for elections on an individual basis.

Also, society forces political parties to join alliances, as societal debates and the general mood supports the idea of forming alliances and uniting civil forces in order to prevent the return of political Islam. The percentage of votes won by presidential candidate Hamdeen Sabahi might convince political parties that backed him to join new alliances. Al-Noor Party might also face the same problem, as the general mood is against Political Islam. Thus, Al-Noor Party must look for a new civil partner that can help it achieve satisfactory results.

Political parties also face challenges with regard to gathering sufficient funding which affects their performance and forces them to join alliances to compensate for a shortage in financial resources. This can be especially noted with regard to new political parties linked to the revolution's slogans. This led most alliances to depend on public figures in the 2011 elections as part of the rising phenomenon of having

"financial sponsors" for the political parties' or alliances' campaigns. In 2014, the new law imposed financial ceilings for electoral campaigns.

Finally, the usage of media resources is also closely linked to the previous point. Some parties do not possess media channels or tools that enable them to conduct promotional campaigns; this is why they aim to join alliances with powerful partners who own media channels and can help with funding media campaigns.

Conclusion:

Previous experiences have shown that successful alliances are based on clear and common goals and interests but are deeply affected by the surrounding political environment. Despite the growing collective work culture and the need to form alliances over the last three years, it is still at the development stage and needs further practice and accumulation of experience in order to be more clear and comprehensive, especially on the management level and in the development of appropriate mechanisms. One must also differentiate between electoral alliances and long-term political alliances, as the nature of the alliance has to be determined in its early stages. Political alliances require a special system of checks and balances, and participating political parties have to possess a common and clear vision and have to set their goals from the very beginning. As for electoral alliances, it may be best to form alliances with groups and individuals in order to effectively work together to continue representing them in parliament. In the short run, there are certain practical issues that must be taken into consideration like the number of parliamentary seats that will be allocated for each party on every list as well as estimation of the number of seats their competitors will win. Official spokespersons of the alliances have to be chosen. Notably, electoral alliances have to be like-minded since alliances that include contradictory parties are short-term alliances, which are not expected to continue playing a role within the parliament, even if they succeed in preserving their existence through the campaign without withdrawals or defections.

Footnotes

[1]   This paper is based on meetings with Mr. Essam Sheha from Al-Wafd Party, Mr. Gamal Metwally from the Nour Party Dr. Amr Al-Shoubaki, Ex-MP, Mr. Ahmed Al-Beheiry from the Popular Current, and Mr. Khalid Abd Al-Hamid from The Revolution Continues Alliance.

[2]   The Civil Democratic Alliance finishes a memo on Elections Law to present to the President in the next hours, Al-Youm 27 ,7 June, 2014, http://is.gd/SuUsTe

Coalition Building Checklist

for Political Parties

By Nick Sigler, Former Senior Official for the British Labour Party &Nick Harvey, Member of the House of Commons for the Liberal Democrat Party and Former Minister in the Coalition Government.

A coalition or electoral alliance is a vehicle by which like-minded political parties can come together to fight an election and/or to collaborate in parliament in order to ensure that their voice and their political beliefs have a better chance of being heard. This is based on the principle that in order to achieve anything in a democracy it is usually far easier when done collectively. And by making it easier for smaller parties to get elected, coalitions or alliances are also a means by which minority views can be heard.

Choosing Partners

• Successful alliances are built around common objectives

»» Make sure you are joining together with a party/parties that broadly share your ideas on key policy areas. Be positive, not negative - it's better to form an alliance to achieve positive goals than an alliance that is setting out to prevent things happening.

• Choose for the long term

»» Make sure that the partners you choose are compatible politically and in terms of working methods. 'Coalitions of convenience' rarely succeed or last long.

• Join with parties you feel you can work with

»» It's easier to run a campaign or collaborate in parliament when your working methods, campaign techniques etc. are similar.

• Agree rules for the coalition at an early stage

»» Draft some sort of 'Memorandum of Understanding' at an early stage of the process setting out how the alliance will work, how disputes will be resolved (see below), on what basis new partners to the alliance will be accepted, how the coalition's activities will be financed and so on. But be prepared to be flexible and to compromise!

Agreeing a Policy Programme

• Provides identity and differentiates from other parties/coalitions

» Voters will determine who they vote for on the basis of your programme. It should be precise, accessible and reflect the direction that the coalition wants the country to go in. And it should make clear how the programme is different from other coalitions/ parties.

• Address key issues of concern to the electorate

» Ensure that the programme deals with the issues of greatest concern to the 'street', the electorate – the economy, unemployment, food prices, education, housing – and not those which are of greatest concern to politicians.

• Agree before forming an alliance

» If possible have at least an outline agreement on the programme in place before you agree to go into an alliance – it will help ensure that you are getting together with the right partners and will help establish a professional working relationship.

• Make clear what your 'red lines' are

» In agreeing the programme with your partners, be clear as to what are your 'red lines' - those policies which you absolutely insist on or those to which you are absolutely opposed. These are the issues which can break a coalition and it's important to be up front with them.

• Clarify areas where disagreement is allowed

» Agree with your partners those policy issues where you accept that the alliance may take differing positions, possibly vote in Parliament in opposite ways, without causing the break up of the coalition.

• Put policies before personalities

» One way of building the unity of the coalition and the campaign is by ensuring that policies take priorities over personalities. Although the electorate will be attracted by the personality of the candidates – and whether they respect them and believe they can deliver – their key priority is likely to be the policies and programme you are presenting to the voters.

Selecting Candidates

• Set criteria for the selection of candidates

» Establish early on the criteria on which candidates for election will be chosen taking account of legislative requirements as well as the ethos of the coalition. Decide, as well, the criteria by which the order of candidates on the list will be determined. Agree within the coalition as to whether or not candidates from the different members of the coalition will stand against each other in constituency seats.

• Face of the party/coalition

» The candidates you choose will be the face of the coalition, make sure they understand and reflect the type of policies you want to pursue, the sort of society you want to create. Make sure too that they are more than 'figureheads' and are prepared to actively work and campaign on behalf of the whole coalition.

• Establish joint committee of senior party members?

» Consider setting up a small committee, properly representative of the coalition partners, to oversee the whole process of candidate selection. It should probably be made up of senior party members, who do not want to be candidates, and who command respect from all coalition partners.

Running a Campaign

- Define a unified campaign strategy

» One key element in setting up a coalition will be to agree a campaign strategy, deciding on what will be the main components of your appeal to the electorate. To increase chances of success the campaign should be unified across the coalition and ensure that there are no opportunities for divisions between the coalition partners to be exposed.

- Select coalition spokespersons

» As part of the coalition agreement there should be an agreement on who the key spokespersons - for the campaign, and possibly for the longer term, - should be. Who will speak up for the coalition to the media, who will be the speakers at the main meetings, who will speak for the coalition on the main campaign issues?

- Produce central materials

» To build unity across the campaign it is important to ensure a fair degree of central control over all campaign materials – not just to avoid division within the campaign but also to help ensure that the campaign concentrates on the key issues agreed and is not dragged into irrelevant areas.

- Fight the opposition, not your partners

» Make sure all partners 'buy in' to the campaign strategy and have a part to play in the campaign. Iron out as many difficulties at the earliest opportunity and have a mechanism for resolving disputes (see below).

Working Together in Parliament

- Think long term

» Your alliance should last for at least the lifetime of the Parliament so it's important to smooth out any difficulties before you start operating together in Parliament. And thinking long term will give stability, strength and greater authority to the alliance.

- Agree on working methods

» It would probably be helpful to establish a committee, drawn fairly from all partners to co-ordinate the work of the parties in Parliament. They should also be responsible for alliance discipline (for example, making sure the members of the alliance vote together).

- Who is going to represent the alliance?

» Decide early on how you are going to choose the alliance's representatives on Parliamentary committees and other bodies and who is going to speak on behalf of the alliance on key issues – the alliance spokespersons

- Reviewing and amending policies

» Prior to the election the alliance should have come to a clear agreement on the policy programme that they will pursue in Parliament. But situations and circumstances change over time. It is vital that the alliance is able to respond rapidly so it's important to have a mechanism for regularly reviewing the policy programme and for giving direction to the members of the alliance as to how to

vote in Parliament – always bearing in mind the 'red lines' and 'areas of disagreement' (see above) that were agreed earlier.

• Governing or holding the government to account

» Whether the alliance is supporting the government or in opposition it will always have an important role to play in developing Egyptian democracy. Good government needs effective opposition.

Three Key Principles for Managing the Coalition

1. Establish a Clear Coalition Framework

• Define the rights and responsibilities of coalition partners

» Inevitably, there will be differences between the individual parties that make up a coalition – in terms of size, membership, funding levels, geographical reach, etc. In order to avoid disputes arising from these differences, the coalition agreement/Memorandum of Understanding needs to specify the rights and responsibilities of each party within the coalition. It also needs to establish whether it is only for the purpose of the elections (electoral coalition), or whether the coalition will continue after the parties have elected representatives in Parliament (political coalition). In the case of forming an electoral coalition parties should agree on specific short-term goals related to the election results, while in the case of forming a political coalition they should concentrate on mid/long-term objectives and reach consensus regarding their programme and legislative agenda.

2. Get 'Buy-In' From Your Supporters

• Ensure that your party members support the principle of coalition

» Without the support of party members and activists a coalition agreement could easily fail. Wherever possible make sure members are kept informed about the coalition building process, that their views are listened to and that there is a way in which they can express approval – or disapproval – for the coalition agreement before it is signed

3. Resolve Disputes Quickly

• Set up a mechanism for resolving disputes

» It is inevitable that disputes will arise within the coalition so it is vital that a mechanism is established for resolving them. The mechanism should be fair, transparent and be able to respond rapidly. It should be armed with clear and effective sanctions. It is probably best to involve party members who no longer have a direct interest in elections, who are widely respected and who are considered to have good judgement. And it is vital that the disputes resolution mechanism is set up long before any disputes arise – even if it is never used.

Coalition Checklist for Political Parties ✓

Choosing Partners
- [ ] Identify common objectives
- [ ] Choose for the long term
- [ ] Join with parties you feel you can work with
- [ ] Agree rules for the coalition at an early stage

Agreeing a Policiy Programme
- [ ] Provide identity and differentiate from other parties/coalitions
- [ ] Address key issues of concern to the electorate
- [ ] Agree the programme before forming an alliance
- [ ] Make clear what are your 'red lines'
- [ ] Clarify areas where disagreement is allowed
- [ ] Put policies before personalities

Selecting Candidates
- [ ] Set criteria for the selection of candidates
- [ ] Make sure the candidates will be the face of the party/coalition
- [ ] Establish joint selection committee of senior party members

Running a Campaign
- [ ] Define a unified campaign strategy
- [ ] Select coalition spokespersons
- [ ] Produce central materials
- [ ] Fight the opposition, not your partners

Working Together in Parliament
- [ ] Think long term
- [ ] Agree on working methods
- [ ] Choose who is going to represent the alliance in key roles and positions
- [ ] Establish a mechanism for reviewing and amending policies
- [ ] Governing or holding the government to account

Three Key Principles for Managing a Coalition
- [ ] Have a clear framework for the coalition, including rights and responsibilities of partners
- [ ] Ensure that your party members support the principle of the coalition
- [ ] Set up a mechanism for resolving disputes quickly