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ABSTRACT
        This paper describes the development of a parliamentary
research service in Egypt. The first part investigates the impact on the
Egyptian parliament (the People's Assembly) of the development of a new
social and cultural environment that fostered the democratization process.
The second part deals with how the establishment of a parliamentary research
service responded to the needs and characteristics of the Egyptian
environment in a way that could enhance the decision-making capabilities of
the legislature. The third part explains how this new unit started to
function and describes some of its early endeavors. The fourth part sheds
light on the services and products provided by this research service, and the
last part discusses present challenges and future prospects. (MES)

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Developing a Parliamentary Research Service The Egyptian Experience

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Abstract

There is almost a general consensus that to perform its role effectively, the legislature requires a research service that provides the information and analyses necessary to make informed decisions. However, creating a parliamentary research capacity raises crucial questions concerning its pattern of organization, style of operation, and its services and products.

Although research units in different parliaments offer a variety of successful models to choose from, reading one's own environment and responding to its needs and characteristics will always remain the key elements in finding the right answers to the previous questions. In this context, the Egyptian experience in developing a parliamentary research unit might be of interest and value to parliaments which are also considering creating a research service.

Paper

Introduction and Road Map for the Paper

Since the mid 1970's, Egyptian society has been experiencing gradual but important transformation both in the economic and political fields. Starting with the adoption of the open door policy, the Egyptian economy began to change from a planned economy to a private sector-led one. The steps in this direction accelerated in the late 1980's, and in 1991 Egypt

embarked upon a comprehensive economic reform and structural adjustment program, the core of which was liberalization and privatization. These developments were coupled with major steps in the process of democratization, at the forefront of which came the re-introduction of party politics for the first time since 1952. The democratization process entailed also a greater freedom of expression and freedom of the media, a less stringent control over the activity of civil society organizations, and more transparency of government behaviour.

The interaction of these economic and political factors created a new social and cultural environment in Egypt. This environment fostered the democratization process within a favorable international climate witnessing a rising tide of democracy in many parts of the world.

The first part of this paper investigates the impact of these developments on the Egyptian parliament (the People's Assembly). The second part deals with how the establishment of a parliamentary research service responded to the needs and characteristics of the Egyptian environment in a way that could enhance the decision-making capabilities of the legislature. The third part of the paper explains how this new unit started to function and describes some of its early endeavors. The fourth part sheds lights on the services and products provided by this research service. The last part discusses present challenges and future prospects.

The Impact of the New Environment on the Egyptian Parliament

The restructuring of the political, economic, social and cultural aspects of Egyptian society directly affected the Parliament in many ways:

- The opposition parties together with a number of independents gained representation in the People's Assembly (PA) starting from the 1979 election. Consequently - and despite an overwhelming majority by the ruling party - parliamentary debates became more vigorous and lively reflecting different points of views, not only those supporting the regime as it was the case under the one party system. Moreover the opposition tried to compensate for its limited numbers by using strong rhetoric depending, in most cases, on good analysis of the issue concerned.
- The majority party showed increased tolerance for alternative points of views expressed by its members inside the Parliament without regarding their attitudes as violating the party line or discipline.
- Public opinion began to demand more knowledge and information about Parliament. This reflected a new perceived role of the legislature in the governance of the nation, especially regarding control over the government, together with formulating laws and policies that guaranteed an effective economic transformation, minimized its negative implications, and safeguarded social welfare.
- The media started to show unprecedented interest in monitoring deliberations conducted in Parliament and the performance of its members. The TV began broadcasting parliamentary sittings, while national and opposition press devoted whole pages to inform people about what was going on inside the Parliament.

Developing a Research Service in the Egyptian Parliament

These changes in Parliament became more profound and evident towards the end of the 1980's. With the restructuring of the general secretariat of the People's Assembly following the advent of a new and energetic Secretary General in 1989, the time seemed right to establish a new unit that could cope with such changes.

The **main goal** of the new unit was to make available objective studies and balanced analysis relating not only to different topics discussed by the PA, but also to important issues and developments at the local, regional and international levels. **Another task** assigned to the new research service was to provide the institutional memory of the PA. This in fact responded to a

serious need to secure an easy and organized access to trace any subject discussed by the PA in the past years, and to provide a brief review of the procedures, debates, and the final decision adopted regarding each issue.

As for the **location** of the research service; it was decided from the beginning that it was not to be based in the library or to be part of it. The reason behind the decision was the clear cut definition of the word "research" in the Egyptian language and culture, and hence an obvious distinction between the work of a librarian and that of a researcher. Probably that is why one can hardly find an institution in Egypt where the research unit is part of its library. It was also argued that locating the new unit in the old and complicated organizational hierarchy of the library might hinder the desired independence of the unit and undermine the enthusiasm and creativity of its staff. However, considering the necessary cooperation and coordination between the library and the research service, it seemed appropriate that both of them should be part of a broader organizational framework, one of the four main divisions of the general secretariat of the PA. This situation changed in the beginning of 1998 when both the library and the research service became directly attached to the Secretary General.

The third question that had to be tackled was to decide **whether research and analysis responsibilities should be performed solely by the new unit**. A thorough examination of the organizational structure of the PA in 1989 revealed that each of the 18 standing committees had between 15 and 20 researchers among its staff. Most of the efforts of those researchers were devoted to preparing committee reports based on the discussions conducted inside committee meetings, and investigating some specific points relevant to those reports. There was also the Department of Parliamentary Conferences, which received careful consideration during the restructuring of the general secretariat, reflecting the marked increase in the activities of parliamentary diplomacy. Consequently, it was decided to provide this department with a group of researchers whose efforts would be devoted entirely to preparing the studies and papers necessary to participate in various parliamentary forums and to exchange parliamentary visits. Given that situation, it seemed appropriate to adopt a combination of a centralized and dispersed research service. This meant that committee staff would continue to research specific points, while the new research service would provide what was lacking, in particular background papers and comparative studies. As for the Department of Parliamentary Conference, the research service was to provide help whenever that was needed.

Regarding **the scale** of new unit and **the skills** of its staff, it started off with six researchers specializing in law, economics, and political sciences. The unit now has 36 researchers specializing mainly in the three previous fields plus others like agriculture, history, and sociology.

How to Function

Apart from monitoring important developments at the local, regional, and international levels and preparing issue briefs relating to them, another important matter remained to be settled and that was how the research service would function. I have mentioned that the new unit was not a part of the library and that librarians did not constitute part of its staff. Therefore the receipt of inquiries concerning data or basic descriptive information requiring reference activity - and which represent high percentage of the inquiries received by many other parliamentary research units - was not to be part of the unit's responsibility.

As for requests for analysis and in-depth research, reading one's own environment was again a determining factor. Taking into account the long and heavy legacy of the one party system, and the educational status and political culture of a large number of the PA members, we realized that we had to work hard to generate demand for our services and products. In other words, we had to create the need for information and the awareness of its importance. So, we took the strategic decision to offer some of our products, rather than just waiting for requests.

It might be of interest here to mention some of our **early endeavors**. We thought that it was

best to start our activity with one service which the PA really lacked, and thereby make a strong impact. The ad-hoc committee for the reply to the Government Policy Statement seemed a suitable target. This committee, which is chaired by the Deputy Speaker, is formed every session after the Prime Minister delivers his statement and, consists of a large number of MPs (eg 45 this session) representing all parties in the PA including the independents. Since it is an ad-hoc committee, it does not have regular staff but to perform its work effectively it needs be provided with a series of policy papers - containing policy analysis and policy evaluation - amounting to 40 papers on average. In 1991 - when we had only 8 researchers - we provided this committee with some six papers on different topics. This was enough for the committee members to realize that their current state of knowledge was less than that needed to deal with the other topics. So in 1992 we were asked to supply the committee with as many policy papers as possible. The research service prepared 18 policy papers that year, and when the committee finalized its report we were asked by the Speaker of the PA to issue a comparative study between this report and the Government Policy Statement. As from 1993, every session the research service now supplies the ad-hoc committee with all the required policy analysis, and prepares the above-mentioned comparative study.

Another early endeavor is note worthy. The PA debates on the Government Policy Statement (GPS) each session is the most important parliamentary occasion, when the largest number of MPs (e.g. 287 out of 454 last session) take the floor to express their views and demands regarding various policy matters. These debates also continue over a long period covering more than 25 sittings full of interventions and comments from the Government representatives. We thought that we should not miss this valuable opportunity to offer one of the research service products. So, based on close monitoring of these discussions and content analysis of what was said during them, we published a brief analytical study at the end of the debates of 1992, before the Prime Minster delivered his final comment on them. This study summarised the main points of view raised on different topics, points of agreement and disagreement between different parties, comments and promises made by the Government representatives, and new issues brought to light that were not included either in the GPS or the committee report. The study also contained quantitative analysis indicating the relative weight accorded to each issue and the share of local demands vis-à-vis national ones (a controversial subject in Egyptian society). The study had a wide impact and became one of the research service's regular products. It is now also sent to the Prime Minister before he delivers his final comments on the (GPS) debates each session, and is a basic document when preparing policy papers for the ad hoc committee of the next session.

Services and Products

The research service in the Egyptian Parliament offers a wide range of products. As mentioned, it prepares policy papers, background papers, and issue briefs. It also publishes fact sheets and conducts basic research if necessary. A large part of its work is devoted to making comparative studies. Of particular interest are the comparative studies on parliamentary procedures in the different parliaments of the world. Not only does this kind of study enhance the political and parliamentary culture of the members of PA, but it also fills a substantial gap in this field in the Arabic literature.

Another product, which other research services may not be familiar with, is the documentary and analytical report on the PA work, which is prepared for each session and each legislative term. This is the report that traces back each issue discussed in the PA and gives a brief review of its debates and procedures. For example, if one is tracing a certain bill, the report will include the following: the aim of this bill, date of its referral to the standing committee concerned, main points of the committee report, amendments introduced by the committee, date of submitting the report to the plenary sitting, number of MPs participating in the debate, main points raised by different parties, amendments approved by the house, government comments, final decision by the house, and any special procedures that were followed. The report also includes quantitative analysis - a statistical and graphical summary showing the volume of parliamentary workload.

The research service publishes various booklets and brochures aimed at educating the public about the Parliament, its structure, function, and history. It also responds to requests from local and foreign organizations regarding these matters.

Present Challenges and Future Prospects

The satisfaction in our achievements to date does not mask the fact that there are serious difficulties and challenges that still have to be tackled. **Recruiting staff** is a major difficulty. Apart from the problem which is familiar to other parliamentary research units of finding the qualified researcher who is able to conduct the kind of research the legislature needs, we also have problems specific to the PA.

When the research service was established, the PA had already excess staff especially in its 18 standing committees. Accordingly, it was only prepared to hire a limited number of new employees. We thought that we could recruit some of our staff from committee researchers, as they at least had the advantage of knowing how the legislature operates, and in that way the PA could make the best use of its human resources. Unfortunately, this solution proved to be a failure. Committee staff were so used to a certain kind of work that it was hard to teach them the new methodology and techniques required for preparing the different and new products of the research service. We realized that we were better off with the fresh graduates who joined the new unit and went through intensive 'on the job' training. However the PA was not offering the competitive salaries necessary to hire and keep researchers. Not only did we have to take the second best researchers after the universities had their pick, but there was always the danger of loosing them to other research centers offering better salaries. On the other hand, we failed in our attempt to create a new corps or category of staff to accommodate the new researchers. Thus we were faced by another difficult situation inside the PA with the new researchers getting the same salaries as committee staff although they were working longer hours and doing extra work.

We tried to compensate weak salaries by giving cash incentives and bonuses, but again this did not work very well as the PA has a very rigid and tight system of incentives. We are relying now on non-cash incentives like flexible working hours, priority in taking free English language courses and other training courses, and priority in attending seminars and various conferences in Egypt.

Information technology represents quite a challenge to us. The PA established an IT department in 1994, but there is a huge gap between what this department is doing on the one hand and the users' needs on the other. We have not yet benefited from the different applications of IT in the research field, and we are also suffering from the slow pace of the automation process in the library. We think the best solution of this problem is to have IT officers among the staff of the research service and the library as well, but unfortunately so far that has not been feasible.

Our plan for creating a parliamentary research service had many experimental features, and hence involved a degree of trial and error. We did not **market our services** properly neither among the PA staff nor its members. The relationship with the committee staff is not yet fully understood: to some we have to explain that our job is to help and not to compete; to others we have to say that it is not our responsibility to do their work for them. As for PA members, some of them are not aware of many of our products, while others do not even know the location of the research service in the parliament building.

Much of our future prospects depends on solving these problems, but a great deal also relies on enhancing democracy in Egypt. The legislature does not operate in a vacuum, but performs its role in the context of the cultural, political and socio-economic environment. In this environment democracy should not be treated in dichotomous terms of either being there or not, but rather as a continuous variable that may attain different levels at different times.

Taking more steps on the hard road of building a democratic society in Egypt will undoubtedly have its direct and strong impact on the research service of the Egyptian Parliament. Suffice to mention here that if democratization means - amongst other things - free dissemination and flow of information, stronger political parties, and a higher representation of the opposition in parliament, then this will enhance the importance of parliamentary debates based on the objective analysis of alternative points of views, as policy decisions of the government will be largely influenced by the outcome of these debates.

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