

Egyptian constitutional referendum passes amid low turnout

By Stefan Steinberg
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Official results for the referendum on reforms to the Egyptian constitution held on Saturday reveal that 77 percent of voters voted in favour of changes to the country's constitution, though turnout was low at 41 percent. Official sources had originally indicated on Sunday that the turnout had been as high as 60 percent.

In fact, just over 18-and-a-half million Egyptians voted, out of around 45 million eligible voters, and early figures indicate that in certain Cairo suburbs and in the city of Alexandria, a majority voted no to the proposed constitutional changes.

The referendum—sponsored by the Egyptian military government—is regarded as a way to ensure a smooth transition from the dictatorship of President Hosni Mubarak, who resigned amid mass demonstrations on February 11, to a regime that continues to uphold the interests of the country's ruling elite and its imperialist backers.

The initiative for changes to the Egyptian constitution was made by the country's ruling military council, which appointed a panel of jurists and political appointees to draw up the amendments. The amended constitution was finalised on February 26, leaving just two weeks for the preparation and organisation of a national referendum.

The thoroughly fraudulent and undemocratic nature of the process was underlined by the declaration from the Supreme Military Council: in the event of a no vote, it would impose its own constitution, until a new one can be drafted.

This farce had the full backing of Mubarak's National Democratic Party and the Muslim Brotherhood. Both parties sent representatives to take part in discussion on the proposed changes to the constitution, alongside military and judicial experts.

In a bid to get out the vote, the military council

decreed that voters would be allowed to cast ballots at any polling center in the country with their national ID cards as the only necessary proof of identity. During the short campaign for the referendum, the state television ran repeated broadcasts calling for a yes vote.

In order to put pressure on the electorate to vote yes, establishment figures and the parties supporting the amendments declared that a failure to vote yes would involve a delay in fresh parliamentary and presidential elections planned for later this year. In fact, the changes to the country's constitution put forward in the referendum were entirely cosmetic. One of the main demands of those participating in protests against Mubarak was a complete scrapping of the country's constitution, which had awarded the dictator emergency powers to rule Egypt for the past 30 years.

The proposed changes to the constitution left the all-embracing powers of the president largely untouched. The most controversial amendment in the revised constitution scrapped the unlimited power of the president to rule by emergency decree only to replace it with a clause that permits the head of state to impose a state of emergency for a period of up to six months before putting his decision to a public vote.

Other amendments permit a future president to serve a possible two terms in office—i.e., a total of eight years—and forbid anyone from standing for the presidency if they are not Egyptian or if they are married to a foreigner.

The phony nature of the proposed amendments led many Egyptian commentators in blogs or interviews to dismiss the military's referendum as “old wine in new bottles” and an attempt “to patch up the old discredited system”.

The most enthusiastic supporter of the referendum

alongside the former ruling National Democratic Party was the Muslim Brotherhood, which had been officially banned from political activity under the Mubarak regime.

The Muslim Brotherhood campaigned heavily in favour of the referendum and called upon all of its followers to vote yes. According to the Associated Press, “Many were drawn to the polls in a massive, last-minute effort by the Muslim Brotherhood.”

Following the announcement of the result, a leading spokesman for the Brotherhood, Essam al-Aryan, called the result a “victory for the Egyptian people”, which would allow the country to “turn a page and enter a new phase”.

Al-Aryan also indicated prior to the vote that the growing wave of popular revolt in neighbouring Arab countries was also an important factor in the Brotherhood’s decision to close ranks with the Military Council and support the constitutional amendments. “We are facing serious threats on our borders and the longer the transitional period lasts, the more the burden is for the military,” he said “but we will heartily accept whatever the majority sees as best for the future of Egypt”.

Commenting on the referendum and the role of the Brotherhood, Nasser Amin, head of the Arab Center for Independent Justice in Cairo told *Deutsche Welle*: “I have the impression that the methods of the past are being used again to an extent. That means: rushing through things, not allowing a general debate about the constitution, not allowing an interim constitution and insufficiently changing the old charter on certain points. And the use of religious groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood to push through the constitutional changes.”

Following the result of the referendum, the Coalition of the Youth of the Revolution, which participated in the protests and demonstrations of the past weeks and months, issued a statement on Facebook urging its supporters to accept the result of the referendum. “We call on members of this Facebook page to respect the will and choice of the people after this democratic exercise which we regard as an historic departure in Egyptian political life,” the message said.

At the same time, media reports make clear that there was widespread opposition to the referendum, particularly in the country’s major metropolises and

among youth. After the result of the referendum was announced, youth gathered in Tahrir Square, and shouted “illegitimate” and “We need a new constitution”. They also criticised the role of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Opposition to the referendum also came from Egypt’s estimated 8 million Coptic Christians, whose leaders instructed their followers to vote no. In recent months, Coptic Christians have been subject to a series of murderous assaults at the hands of Muslim extremists collaborating with state forces.

Future presidential candidates Mohamed ElBaradei and Arab League chief Amr Moussa had both declared their opposition to the referendum, but their objections did not reflect opposition to the dictatorial powers contained in the constitution. Rather, both men were worried that the amended constitution would interfere with their respective presidential candidacies.

Both figures are increasingly discredited. ElBaradei and a group of his supporters were pelted with rocks, bottles and cans by youth when he turned up to vote at a polling centre in Cairo. The crowd of youth chanted: “We don’t want you, we don’t want you,”

As the head of the Arab League, Amr Moussa has just pledged his support for the Western bombardment of Libya and is increasingly assuming the role of a pariah among the Arab masses.

In an indication of the continuing close relations between the US administration and the Egyptian military, US Senate Foreign Relations head John Kerry praised the referendum on Egyptian constitutional reform held last Saturday. Kerry told the AFP wire service, “the referendum was very exciting.... The numbers of people who voted, the enthusiasm, the way they conducted themselves...there was a lot of energy.”

Kerry arrived in Cairo on Sunday for talks with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, Prime Minister Essam Sharaf, and Amr Moussa. Kerry also discussed the ongoing attack by the US and its allies against Libya.

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