

Egyptian constitutional referendum marked by low turnout, allegations of fraud

By Johannes Stern
17 December 2012

On Saturday, the first round of voting on Egypt's draft constitution took place in ten of the country's 27 governorates, including Egypt's two largest cities, the capital Cairo and the coastal town of Alexandria. Egypt's remaining 17 governorates will vote on December 22.

Coming after three weeks of mass protests against Egypt's new Islamist President Mohamed Mursi and the ruling Muslim Brotherhood (MB), the referendum was marked by low voter turnout, violence and allegations of fraud.

The conditions under which the referendum was carried out make a mockery of democracy. Over 300,000 military and police forces were reportedly deployed to secure the polling stations.

One week ago, Mursi issued a presidential decree ordering the Egyptian army to help the police protect "vital state institutions" and "maintain public order and safeguard election facilities" during the referendum. The law essentially reintroduces emergency law and marks a first step towards the formal proclamation of military dictatorship in Egypt. It gave the military "all the powers of judicial officers," allowing it to arrest and try civilians during the referendum.

A show of abstention was the working class's verdict on the reactionary plans of the Egyptian bourgeoisie. Only 33 percent of 25 million eligible voters cast a vote, underlining the widening gulf separating the Egyptian political establishment and the working class.

In the urban centers and amongst workers, the rejection of the constitution was especially high. According to Egyptian state television, 68 and 72 percent of the electorate voted "No" in Cairo and Alexandria, respectively.

At a polling station in Abdeen in downtown Cairo, Rida Mustafa, 63, said: "The constitution is not in the

interests of the country and not good for my children and grandchildren. Food prices have gone up since the revolution. The Brotherhood project has failed. Mursi is worse than Mubarak."

Other provinces where voters rejected the proposed constitution included the governorates of Gharbiyah and Daqahliya in the Nile Delta, where much of Egypt's textile industry is located.

With the referendum, the Egyptian ruling class aims to reconstitute authoritarian rule after former dictator Hosni Mubarak was ousted in mass revolutionary struggles in February 2011. The constitution provides legal ammunition for forming a more rightwing, explicitly Islamist political basis for the continued dictatorship of the Egyptian army and an intensified clampdown on the working class.

By keeping Article 2 of the old constitution, which declares that the "principles of Islamic law [*shari'a*] are the principal source of legislation," Mursi and the MB keep the door open for the further Islamization of the state.

The most significant element of the constitution is the enshrinement of the privileges and power of the Egyptian military, which is largely financed through \$1.3 billion in annual aid from Washington.

Article 197 of the constitution approves a National Defense Council (NDC), headed by the president and including the most important ministers, the chief of intelligence, the chief of staff of the armed forces and the leading army commanders. It is "responsible for matters pertaining to the methods of ensuring the safety and security of the country and to the budget of the Armed Forces."

The NDC is thus not controlled by parliament, functioning as a state within the state with essentially unlimited powers.

According to article 197 all future laws relating to the military must be consulted with the NDC, to which further unspecified powers can be granted. The constitution further says that the defense minister must be an army officer and act as the commander in chief of the Armed Forces. Article 198 allows military trials for civilians “for crimes that harm the armed forces.”

The Egyptian bourgeoisie and its backers in Washington know that its anti-worker, pro-imperialist policies can only be carried out by a brutal dictatorship. In recent weeks, the Mursi regime has secured loans from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. It is preparing to further privatize the Egyptian economy and cut subsidies for fuel and bread, on which masses of impoverished Egyptians depend. Mursi also supports the US war drive against Syria and Iran.

In the past weeks the MB’s Islamist cadres, the military, and the police cooperated to suppress renewed mass protests against Mursi’s complicity in the Israeli onslaught against Gaza and Mursi’s November 22 decree claiming dictatorial powers. In heavy clashes around Tahrir Square and the Presidential Palace in Cairo and in other major Egyptian cities, at least 10 people were killed, hundreds arrested and over one thousand injured.

Egypt’s political parties were split over the result of the first round of the constitutional referendum. Yesterday Mursi’s Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), the MB’s political arm, declared on its web site that 56.5 percent of the ballots were in favor of the draft constitution, and 43.5 percent against.

The more secular-leaning opposition of the National Salvation Front (NSF) claimed that 66 percent of Egyptians voted against the draft constitution in the first round. The NSF is an alliance of various liberal, Nasserite and pseudo-left parties led by former UN official Mohamed ElBaradei, former Nasserite presidential candidate Hamdeen Sabahi, and ex-Mubarak regime official Amr Moussa.

The NSF accused the government of “unprecedented rigging,” stating that 750 violations took place across the governorates participating in the vote.

Human rights groups called for a revote. Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies leader Bahi El-Din Hassan told a press conference on Sunday that “despite the revolution, we had a referendum like those held during the Mubarak era.”

Despite its criticisms, the official opposition is deeply involved in the attempts by the Islamists and the army to push through the constitution. The NSF and pseudo-left groups like the Revolutionary Socialists (RS) all seek to give legitimacy to the referendum, calling upon workers and youth to participate in this fraudulent operation.

All the parties of the bourgeois opposition—be they liberal or petty-bourgeois “left”—fear an independent revolutionary movement of the working class much more than the Islamist factions in the Egyptian ruling elite, with whom they share basic class interests.

In a telling moment, Amr Moussa, a leader and founder of the NSF, met Mahdi Akef, the former Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, at a polling station in New Cairo. They shook hands and posed for a picture that was published on the Arabic web site of the Egyptian daily *Al-Ahram*.

Shortly thereafter, dozens of angry women voters chased away Khairat al-Shater, a multimillionaire tycoon and the Deputy MB Supreme Guide, chanting, “Illegitimate” and “Get out, Shater.”

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