

Low turnout as Egypt's US-backed junta holds constitutional referendum

By Alex Lantier
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The January 14-15 referendum conducted by Egypt's US-backed military junta on its draft constitution was a political fraud. Its aim was to provide a pseudo-legal cover for the junta's bloody July 3, 2013 coup, carried out amid mass working class protests against Islamist President Mohamed Mursi.

Voter turnout for the referendum was low. The military carried out a massive security operation for the vote, mobilizing hundreds of thousands of police and soldiers to intimidate "no" voters and crush protests by supporters of Mursi's Muslim Brotherhood (MB).

The junta's own minister of state for administrative development, Hany Mahmoud, said Tuesday that only 28 percent of voters had cast ballots at 40 polling stations specially chosen by the junta. Initial reports suggested that even fewer voters went to the polls yesterday.

An air of terror and intimidation hung over the referendum—a counterrevolutionary initiative the junta is using to restore the type of authoritarian regime that existed before a mass working class uprising toppled US-backed dictator President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011.

Army detachments and low-flying Apache attack helicopters patrolled polling stations, with troops pressing arriving voters to vote "yes." Police were deployed on the inside of the polling stations, in line with orders issued by Major General Tawfik Abdel-Samei.

From a polling station at a stadium in Nasr City, the BBC wrote: "Outside the polling station, a group of voters and military enthusiasts wave pictures of the Armed Forces chief, General [Abdel Fattah] el-Sisi. Vendors sell posters of the general, and a white police jeep plays military songs. The security forces openly encourage a 'Yes' vote, which is seen as the same

thing as a vote for General Sisi. 'Sisi! Sisi!' chanted one officer carrying a walkie-talkie... Anyone in favor of a 'No' vote is staying well away."

Security forces killed 11 people nationwide during the referendum, including a 14-year-old boy gunned down Tuesday in a clash between police and MB supporters in the Upper Egyptian city of Sohag.

Yesterday, MB protesters disrupted traffic on the Cairo subway, organized human chains, and clashed with police in several cities, including Alexandria.

The junta, which last summer crushed MB protests against the coup in a series of bloody crackdowns that killed over 1,000 people and wounded thousands, remains terrified of renewed protests or a mass uprising. Security forces were placed on high alert again yesterday evening amid reports that protesters were heading to Tahrir Square.

The draft constitution issued by the junta is a reactionary document, enshrining the army as a state within the state and giving it broad powers to crush opposition. Article 203 specifies that the National Defense Council, a body dominated by the army and intelligence chiefs, controls the armed forces' budget and decides national security issues. Article 204 states that civilians can face trials in military courts for acting against the army, its equipment, any of the many factories or installations it owns, its military secrets, or public funds.

The constitutional referendum was applauded by the Egyptian army and its imperialist backers in the United States and Europe.

Perhaps the clearest indication of the counterrevolutionary character of the referendum was its open endorsement by the former dictator, Hosni Mubarak. From his bed in the military hospital in Maadi, Mubarak issued a call via his lawyer, Fareed

El-Deeb, for Egyptians to approve the junta's constitution.

"This is the president's wish, in order to achieve our hope of building a new state," El-Deeb told privately-owned Al-Mehwer TV.

El-Sisi—who is expected to run for president, so that the head of state would again be an army officer, like Mubarak—called for the success of the referendum as part of his presidential bid. In a meeting on Saturday, he appealed for a large turnout "so as not to embarrass the army before the entire world."

"If I nominate myself, there must be a popular demand, and a mandate from my army," he said.

Washington made clear its support for the junta and its repression by including a \$1.525 billion aid package for the Egyptian army in the budget passed by the US Congress on the first day of Egypt's constitutional referendum.

According to an analysis by the Atlantic Council, the budget measure exempts Egypt from US laws barring US financial aid for military dictatorships such as Egypt. In order for Washington to pay the funds to Cairo, it would need to certify only that the junta was following its own "road map for a democratic transition," of which the constitution is a part.

The European Union (EU) praised the junta's counterrevolutionary referendum, in Orwellian fashion, as the dawn of a new era of democracy.

EU Foreign Policy Chief Catherine Ashton said: "The constitutional process—both before and following the referendum—could offer a chance for a new political dialog and interaction leading to democratic elections, a fair representation of different political views in the future parliament, accountability for the government and state institutions, and greater security and prosperity for all."

The anti-democratic character of the draft constitution and the referendum highlights the reactionary role played by the liberal and "left" political organizations of Egypt's affluent middle class. Fearing a revolution by the working class, organizations such as the National Salvation Front (NSF) and Tamarod, and their pseudo-left supporters, including the misnamed Revolutionary Socialists (RS) group, channeled mass working class protests against Mursi behind the army.

Now they are either directly supporting the junta's

attempts to turn the clock back to the Mubarak era or making toothless oppositional gestures.

The NSF, a coalition of liberal and Nasserite parties, applauded the junta's constitutional referendum. After denouncing Mursi's MB as "the dumbest political organization in history," Ahmed Fawzy of the Egyptian Social Democratic Party enthused: "The national charter will be endorsed no matter what they do."

Sherif Taher of the NSF's Wafd Party told *Al Ahram* that he wanted as large as possible a turnout in the referendum to try to give the junta more legitimacy.

"What really matters now is that we see a high turnout," he said. "I am afraid the media keeps saying the numbers are huge, which could make other people not bother to cast their ballots... If, for instance, the turnout does not exceed 30 percent, that would mean the public has more or less rejected the referendum."

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