

Egyptian junta steps up repression after constitutional referendum

By Johannes Stern
23 January 2014

Following the adoption of the constitution in the January 14-15 referendum, the US-backed Egyptian military junta and its political supporters are seeking to suppress opposition and restore the dictatorship that existed in Egypt before mass working class struggles toppled long-time dictator Hosni Mubarak nearly three years ago.

Last Friday, security forces cracked down on protests called by the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood (MB), killing four and injuring at least 15. According to an Egyptian Health Ministry statement, three protesters were killed in the capital Cairo and one in Fayoum on Saturday. Protesters were also injured in Giza and Minya.

On Monday, a spokesperson for Cairo University—the largest university in Egypt, with 280,000 students—said that the university council had agreed to allow police on the campus. There have been ongoing protests against the military regime, often organized by students close to the MB, throughout this semester. Many students have been killed in clashes with the police forces, including last Thursday.

In a speech at the Police Academy on Tuesday, Defense Minister and de facto dictator General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi threatened that Egyptian army and police will confront with force any attempt to undermine “security and stability.” He praised the military and police as “the protective shields of the homeland” and boasted, “the process of securing the referendum proved to the world our ability to enforce security in our country.”

The referendum made a mockery of a democratic process. It was a desperate attempt by a blood-stained junta to provide a pseudo-legal cover for its July 3 military coup—staged amidst mass working class protest against Islamist President Mohamed Mursi—to pre-empt

a social revolution and enshrine a military dictatorship in the constitution.

The new constitution defends the power and privileges of the military, which has been the dominant political force and the cornerstone of capitalist rule in Egypt since the 1952 coup led by the Free Officers under Gamal Abdel Nasser.

It enshrines the military as a state within the state, granting it virtual autonomy from civilian oversight and wide powers to suppress opposition. Article 234 establishes that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) will appoint the Minister of Defence, while article 203 stipulates that the National Defence Council, dominated by military leaders and intelligence chiefs, decides on the military budget and national security issues. Article 204 allows the continued prosecution of civilians in military trials.

The vote on this reactionary document—which goes even beyond the 1971 constitution, the basis of Mubarak’s dictatorship, and the 2012 constitution, the product of the now-exploded alliance between the military and the MB—took place under a virtual military lockdown of the country. Army troops and low-flying Apache attack helicopters patrolled neighborhoods and police and military forces were stationed at polling stations.

Prior to the referendum, an anti-protest law had been issued, and opponents of the military and the referendum were prosecuted ferociously.

In a news conference shortly before the referendum, Interior Minister Mohamed Ibrahim boasted that “every Friday no less than 500 to 600 get arrested.” He elaborated the regime’s strategy of intensified repression: “At the beginning, we used to wait for the demonstration to turn violent, but now we confront them once they congregate. When we confront them,

there are some that run, but, whoever we can grab, we detain.”

According to official figures of the Interior and Health Ministries, security forces arrested 703 protesters and killed 27 only on the three last Fridays before the referendum. During the two days of the vote, the interior ministry said 444 people, including MB members, were arrested, allegedly for “rioting and disrupting the polling.” Security forces killed 11 people throughout the country, including a 14-year-old boy in the Upper Egyptian city of Sohag.

In this atmosphere of terror and intimidation, the Supreme Electoral Committee (SEC) announced on Saturday that the “yes” vote was 98.1 percent—a result recalling the fraudulent elections under Mubarak.

Even according to official numbers, voter turnout was low. According to the SEC, only around 20.1 million of 53.5 million eligible voters cast ballots. At 38.9 percent, the referendum saw one of the lowest turnouts of all polls in Egypt since Mubarak’s ouster. In the March 2011 constitutional referendum and in the runoffs of the presidential elections in June 2012, turnout was 41 and 49 percent, respectively.

The MB-led Anti-Coup Alliance issued a statement accusing the military regime of widespread vote rigging. They wrote that “ballot boxes that were left in the arms of corruption all night were filled illegally with millions of false votes, an old habit from the Mubarak clique who never allowed an election without forgery and fraud.”

Despite its fraudulent character, the constitutional referendum was praised by the junta’s imperialist backers in the United States and Europe. European Union (EU) foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton cynically declared in a statement issued on Sunday, “I would like to congratulate the Egyptian people and the authorities responsible for organizing the vote in a largely orderly manner.”

US Secretary of State John Kerry declared that “Egypt’s turbulent experiment in participatory democracy the last three years has reminded us all that it’s not one vote that determines a democracy, it’s all the steps that follow.”

An US Congressional delegation which met al-Sisi on Sunday reportedly congratulated him on the success of the referendum. Egyptian army spokesman Colonel Ahmed Ali said that “the members of the delegation

underlined their keenness on reporting the realities in Egypt to the Congress, reiterating support for the measures taken by the Egyptian government to restore security and stability.”

These are code words for the intensification of the repressive policies of the military junta, as the third anniversary of the Egyptian Revolution approaches on January 25.

Speaking at a ceremony for new police cadets in New Cairo on Monday, Interior Minister Ibrahim said any attempts to disturb law and order will be met with extreme force. He said he had discussed preparations for the “popular celebrations of 25 January” with his deputies and several security leaders. The Interior Ministry said security forces will intensify patrols and checkpoints at key locations and that security forces “will be equipped with heavy weapons...to stop any attacks.”

The reactionary character of the constitution underscores the reactionary role played by the liberal and “left” political organizations of Egypt’s affluent middle class. Frightened of the specter of a working class revolution in Egypt, organizations such as the National Salvation Front (NSF), the April 6 Youth Movement and the pseudo-left Revolutionary Socialists (RS) supported Tamarod, a right-wing conspiracy, to channel the mass working class protests against Mursi and the MB behind the army.

Most of the parties and organizations which supported the Tamarod campaign have become an integral part of the military dictatorship. During a meeting with Ibrahim on Monday, the leaders of Tamarod reportedly praised the police “for their sacrifices to protect the homeland.” Ibrahim on his part said he was delighted to meet with youth movements and so-called revolutionary forces, praising them as “the nation’s hope for the future.”

To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>