

President Mubarak's party sustains significant losses in Egyptian elections

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President Hosni Mubarak's ruling party has held its majority in parliament, but the Islamic opposition made significant gains in the Egyptian elections that concluded earlier this week. The National Democratic Party (NDP) won 388 of the legislature's 444 elected seats, legal opposition parties took 17 seats and candidates backed by the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood gained 17 seats.

The opposition has doubled its seats in the 454-member legislature. In total 95 independent candidates were elected, but 75 of these had switched their allegiance to the NDP in the three-stage elections, which began October 18. The candidates backed by the Muslim Brotherhood will be the largest single opposition bloc. The NDP held 97 percent of the outgoing parliament, formed in 1995 after elections in which 87 people were killed and more than 1,500 wounded.

Electoral casualties included several high profile government stalwarts and many long-serving NDP parliamentarians. There was a larger turnout than normal, with each stage of the election having a larger vote than the last as the masses were inspired by the NDP's setbacks.

Many people were stopped from voting, particularly in areas of strong opposition to the government. Methods employed by security forces and government heavies included the use of tear gas, threats, beatings, confiscation of ID cards, police cordons and random gunfire. Prior to the elections, the regime had also rounded up and arrested many activists who were allied to independent candidates.

Polling in two constituencies was postponed by court order in an electoral process characterised by violence and state repression that led to 10 deaths. In the last of three runoffs on Tuesday, five people were killed and

40 wounded when police fired bullets and tear gas at those protesting against the exclusion of independent and opposition candidates from polling stations.

The Palestinian Intifada against Israel has ignited simmering social discontent amongst working people towards Mubarak's corrupt regime in recent weeks. Broad layers of the population, including hundreds of thousands of youth, have engaged in protests demanding Egypt take action against Israel and break from its role as a key US ally in the Middle East. There were massive street demonstrations during the Arab Summit in Cairo on October 21-22, called to discuss the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The demonstrations were the first of this character since before the Arab-Israeli conflict of 1973.

The main beneficiary of the growing social and political discontent, the Muslim Brotherhood, was founded in 1928 and advocates the creation of an Islamic state by peaceful means. It has traditionally drawn its support from the educated middle and upper classes and has been an illegal, though tolerated, organisation since the 1950s. The organisation does not represent a major threat to Mubarak. Its victorious candidates have declared the elections as fair and gone so far as to say that they "trust Hosni Mubarak".

Nevertheless the discontent shown by workers and youth in Egypt and elsewhere in the region has sent a sharp warning to Mubarak and all the Arab leaders. They are acutely aware that unrest over Israeli repression of the Palestinians could easily ignite more general opposition to the appalling economic conditions and denial of democratic rights that confront the masses throughout the Middle East.

In what is just as much an attempt to project a measure of independence from the US as it is to gain economic advantage from exploiting trade in oil, Egypt

has recently begun measures to restore diplomatic relations with Iraq. Egypt is now calling for an end to economic sanctions against Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime.

The Egyptian Chamber of Commerce has also taken the unprecedented step of calling for a boycott of trade with Israel. This follows popular boycotts of US and Israeli goods throughout the region.

See also:

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