

Mubarak wins Egypt's stage-managed presidential election

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Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak won another six-year term in office September 7, with 88.6 percent of the total vote. The lop-sided result reflected the carefully orchestrated nature of the campaign, which Mubarak instigated in order to give his dictatorial regime a “democratic” gloss. Despite evidence of large-scale electoral fraud and intimidation, the Bush administration welcomed the vote as a positive step towards democracy.

The poll was the first multi-candidate election held under Mubarak, who has ruled Egypt since 1981. Ballot access was tightly restricted, however, and the state media blatantly favoured the president. Popular hostility towards the phony campaign and the government was demonstrated in the very low voter turnout—just 23 percent according to official figures, which were probably inflated.

The president received 6.31 million votes—a small fraction of Egypt's total population of 71 million. The mass abstention reflected widespread and justified cynicism among ordinary Egyptians that the vote would result in anything other than a Mubarak victory, as well as general apathy regarding the candidacies of the nine presidential challengers. Seven of the candidates were virtually unknown, while the two leading liberal figures focused their campaigns on political reform measures and did not challenge Mubarak's deeply unpopular right-wing economic restructuring program.

Ayman Nour of the Ghad Party received 7.6 percent of the vote, while Numan Gomaa of the Wafd Party finished in third place with 2.9 percent. Nour's second placing surprised Egyptian political analysts, since his liberal Ghad Party was only founded last year and the politician still faces forgery charges relating to the party's registration. Much of Nour's support is believed to have come from supporters of the banned Muslim Brotherhood, which advocated an anti-Mubarak vote. In the lead up to the election, Nour, unlike Gomaa, actively lobbied the Islamists for their support.

Ghad Party spokesman insisted that Nour actually received at least 30 percent of the ballot, and claimed that his supporters were prevented from entering polling stations to

vote. “We will not take these rigged results into consideration, we will take into consideration the will of the people,” Nour declared. The reformist politician has threatened to instigate legal action to overturn the election result.

The Wafd Party also challenged the legitimacy of the ballot. “No candidate would have obtained such a score [i.e., Mubarak's 88.6 percent] in a democratic country,” Gomaa said. “September 7 was like a traditional election day in Egypt, like every other election organised by the military regime.”

Both candidates hope to build on their campaigns to win support in the legislative elections that are due to be held in November. Under existing legislation, only those political parties which secure more than 5 percent of all parliamentary seats will effectively be able to stand candidates in the 2011 presidential election.

The Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights (EOHR) issued a report following the vote detailing numerous incidents of electoral irregularities and corruption. On election day, the president's supporters as well as factory workers and public servants were driven to polling stations in government-paid vehicles. Business owners were threatened with harassment by licensing agencies if they failed to vote. Hafez Abu Seada, EOHR chairman, estimated that up to 15 percent of the total vote had been rigged in favour of Mubarak.

In violation of electoral laws, members of the ruling National Democratic Party wore campaign buttons and other party paraphernalia in polling stations, while opposition monitors were frequently denied supervisory access. In some areas, Wafd and Ghad party members were beaten by pro-government goons, and poll monitors were assaulted and interrogated by security officials. In a number of districts, the names of opposition candidates were not on the ballot. There were also numerous reports of impoverished Egyptians being paid cash, food, or fuel to vote for Mubarak.

Religious officials appointed by the government issued fatwas declaring that it was un-Islamic not to vote. In one

village, Kafr Shaaban, the Inter Press Service reported that loudspeakers mounted in mosques threatened that people who failed to vote would be fined. “We are so poor, and we are scared that the village chieftain will fine us 100 [Egyptian] pounds,” said one woman, Om Ahmed. “I had to vote for the president... We do not want trouble and he will win anyway.”

The Bush administration, while issuing a formal reservation about aspects of the campaign, nevertheless welcomed the re-election of one of its closest Arab allies. “Egypt’s presidential election represents one step in the march towards the full democracy that the Egyptian people desire and deserve,” Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared in a statement. “The process that culminated in the September 7 vote was characterised by freer debate, increased transparency, and improved access to the media, in contrast with previous polls. The practice of universal suffrage in Egypt, without limitations on gender and ethnicity, is a hopeful sign for the region.”

The Bush administration’s ongoing support for the Egyptian regime provides yet another exposure of its cynical claim to be promoting democracy in the Middle East. Equivalent elections held earlier this year in Lebanon and Iran were immediately denounced by Washington, and used as pretexts for further US provocations against Tehran and Damascus. As the vote in Egypt demonstrates, whether the Bush administration condemns an election as fraudulent or warmly endorses it as a step towards democracy has nothing to do with the transparency and fairness of the vote, and everything to do with furthering the interests of US imperialism in the region.

Mubarak hoped that the multi-candidate ballot would placate rising political and social discontent that has seen unprecedented anti-regime protests and growing numbers of workers’ strikes and protests. Far from resolving Egypt’s internal crisis however, the election has set the stage for potentially explosive upheavals.

Immediately following his election victory, the Egyptian president vowed to press ahead with his economic reform program. “The pursuit of reforms is irrevocable,” Mubarak declared in his September 11 victory speech.

The president’s reform program has already led to heightened social polarisation. According to the World Bank’s 2005 *World Development Report*, 44 percent of Egyptians live on less than \$US2 a day and unemployment is estimated at about 20 percent. The *Middle East Times* reported last month that an estimated 450,000 workers lost their jobs between 1991 and 2002 because of privatisations.

This program is set to continue, with the multi-billion dollar banking and insurance industries due to be sold off next. Among the other 83 companies scheduled for

privatisation later this year are the gas distribution network, petroleum companies, and parts of the postal service and telecommunications network. Massive loans from the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and US loans are conditional upon the successful privatisation of these firms.

None of Mubarak’s measures will benefit ordinary Egyptians. On September 9 the Inter Press Service (IPS) found that many state-run companies had been sold off for a fraction of their real value and often ended up in the hands of Mubarak cronies.

“Privatisation has come to mean getting rid of public assets and they are there for the taking. And I find this very crude,” Gouda Abdel-Khalik, an economics professor at Cairo University and former World Bank employee told the IPS. “The motto now is sell any and every asset you lay hands on to whoever, at any price, at any time. This is going too far.”

Public infrastructure and social services meanwhile continue to be chronically underfunded. In a tragic though indicative incident on the eve of the presidential election, a fire engulfed a small and dilapidated community theatre in the town of Beni Suef during a dramatic performance. At least 46 people were killed and 22 injured. The theatre lacked basic fire prevention equipment and the main exit in the overcrowded facility had been locked.

While riot equipped police beat back crowds anxious for news of their friends and family, one ambulance carrying away a body broke down in the middle of the street, forcing people to carry the corpse to another emergency vehicle. “They don’t care about us,” Mahmoud Abdul Hamid told the *New York Times* at the scene. “It’s the whole government that doesn’t care about us, from the guard at the door to the minister.”

President Mubarak has refused to accept the resignation offer tendered by Farouk Hosni, the minister for culture.



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