Egypt parliamentary elections marked by violence and fraud in second round

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As was the case in the first round a week ago, the second round of parliamentary elections in Egypt on Sunday was marked by violence and electoral fraud. Human rights groups and independent election observers reported significant irregularities in all parts of the country. Their verdict on the elections is devastating.

According to a report by the Egyptian Coalition for Monitoring the Elections, both opposition voters and election observers were prevented from entering the polling stations. However, voters of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) frequently received bribes and were driven to the polling stations. In many places, such as working class Shubra neighbourhood in Cairo, there were violent clashes between security forces or between thugs hired by the NDP and supporters of the opposition.

A press release of the Independent Coalition for Elections Observation (ICEO) said the elections had thrown back Egypt by at least 15 years. The standards for free and fair elections had been violated to the "highest degree". The elections were held under conditions of limited fundamental rights, which "did not permit free and fair elections".

Before the elections there had been mass arrests of opposition supporters and the widespread shutting down of critical media.

Following the state violence and repression in the first round of voting, the largest opposition groups, the banned but tolerated Muslim Brotherhood and the liberal Wafd Party, boycotted the second round. The turnout, which was already below 15 percent in the first round, fell below 5 percent.

One year before the presidential elections, the violent actions of the Egyptian regime before and during the parliamentary elections have primarily served to ensure the complete control of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) over the new parliament.

The NDP now has 440 of the 508 parliamentary seats, the official opposition parties, however, total only about a dozen seats. The liberal Wafd Party won six seats, but announced that it would be boycotting the new parliament as a result of what had happened in the elections. The Nasserite Al-Tagammu party won five seats and the smaller Al-Ghad, Al-Gil, Al-Salam and Social Justice parties each have one seat.

The Muslim Brotherhood, which had won 88 seats (20 percent) in the last parliamentary elections, will only be represented in the new parliament by Mohamed Ashour, who opposed the boycott call for the second round. The Muslim Brotherhood was not permitted to win a single constituency.

Even before the elections, well-known members of the NDP such as Moufeed Shehab had called the electoral success of the Islamists in 2005 "a mistake" that would not be repeated. Ever since October 9, when the Muslim Brotherhood announced their participation in the elections, there has been massive repression against the organisation and some 1,400 of their supporters have been arrested.

After the elections, Egyptian Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif said that the increase in representation of different political parties in this year's parliament was "much better than having the forbidden [Muslim Brotherhood] group win the majority of opposition seats". With barely concealed cynicism, he described the elections as the "best in Egyptian electoral history".

Despite the scale of oppression and violence, international reactions to the second round were muted. In her statement on Monday, US State Department spokesperson Megan Mattson did not directly mention the election fraud and massive repression that had occurred in the course of the elections. She said merely, "We hope that all necessary improvements will be made quickly to ensure that future elections are free and fair." She added that the High Elections Commission (HEC) now has the

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responsibility to “investigate the alleged election fraud”.

This requirement is more than hypocritical, since the HEC has no legal rights and is controlled by the NDP, which appoints the majority of its members. It was established as part of the election law in 2007, when judicial supervision of elections was abolished. Critics regard the HEC as no more than a committee that can officially announce the results of elections.

Another statement by Mattson makes even clearer what should be made of US criticism of one of its main allies in the region. Egyptians could only trust their elected representatives if the government were able to “apply existing laws and ensure full and transparent access by observers and representatives of candidates”. For the United States, the primary question is not the holding of fair elections, but the preservation of stability.

A similar reaction was expressed by the European Union. The EU representative for foreign and security policy, Catherine Ashton, said that in every country, an open electoral system was “the key to a strong nation and society”.

This is why the EU had regarded positively the actions taken by the Egyptian government and the HEC to enhance the transparency of elections, she said. But, she added, unfortunately they had not been sufficient. The EU would therefore maintain its demand for national and international election observers for future elections, and would continue to offer Egypt assistance in this regard. Ashton stressed that Egypt was a key partner of the EU, which remained committed to joint cooperation.

Especially among the oppositional elements of the Egyptian bourgeoisie, there is great uncertainty and concern following the violently enforced landslide victory of the NDP. Essam El Erian, a prominent leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, sees Egypt “on the brink of disaster”. The NDP victory marked the end of party pluralism in the one-party system. The next presidential elections were now “worthless”, and the hopes of the opposition at an end.

Karima El Hefnawy, a member of the National Association for Change (NAC), said that Egypt was at a “turning point” and that forces like the Muslim Brotherhood and the Wafd Party should now begin a “new phase”.

In an interview with *Spiegel Online*, Mohamed El Baradei, the founder of the National Association for Change (NAC) coalition and the most well-known Egyptian opposition politician, announced his collaboration with the Muslim Brotherhood towards bringing about “change”.

El Baradei had called for a boycott and regards his strategy as confirmed by the conduct of the elections. Essam Sultan, a leading member of the liberal Islamist Wasat Party and a member of the Kefaya movement, argues similarly. The Egyptian opposition must now draw the lessons from the elections, he said, and understand precisely what had happened. He called on the opposition to form a “national front” that would be aimed at replacing the current system.

Politicians such as El Baradei or Sultan speak for a section of the Egyptian bourgeoisie who believe the popular resentment cannot be contained within the existing NDP autocracy. In a television interview in late September, El Baradei stated that his reform agenda was designed “to prevent” a revolution of the hungry.

Like the NDP, the official opposition also fears the Egyptian masses, whose anger could explode at any time, given the backdrop of a worsening social and political crisis.

Just one day after the elections, the director of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, Bahey El Din Hassan, wrote an editorial comment in the independent daily *Al Masry Al Youm* headlined, “Say hello to radicalism...!” In the article, he predicts that the “scandalous actions” of the NDP would again unleash “radical political trends”. “Election fraud has consequences and the NDP could experience a political backlash”, he wrote.

Amr El Shoboki, another columnist for *Al Masry Al Youm*, accused the NDP leadership of “playing with fire”.

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