

First round of Egyptian parliamentary elections begins

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Voting in parliamentary elections began Monday and continued yesterday in nine of Egypt's 27 governorates. These elections, held under emergency law by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) junta, are the first in Egypt since the mass protests and strikes that forced US-backed dictator President Hosni Mubarak from power on February 11.

The governorates that voted—Cairo, Alexandria, Assiut, the Red Sea, Luxor, Fayoum, Damietta, Port Said, and Kafr El-Sheikh—include southeastern Egypt and most of Egypt's largest cities in the Nile River Delta. Runoff elections will take place on December 5-6. The elections are divided into three, with two other sets of governorates voting on Dec 14-25 and Jan 3-4, with runoffs on December 21-22 and January 10-11 respectively. Election results are expected on January 13.

The main parties running in the election are the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), tied to the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and leading the Democratic Alliance for Egypt; the far-right Salafi Islamist Al-Nour Party, leading the Islamist Alliance; the Egyptian Bloc including the Social Democratic and Al-Tagammu parties and led by the Free Egyptians party of tycoon Naguib Sawiris; and the Completing the Revolution Alliance, including the Revolutionary Youth Coalition, the Egypt Freedom Party and the Socialist Popular Alliance Party.

Numerous local politicians and ex-members of Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP) are also running in the elections, often as independents.

Egyptian press sources reported significant participation in the elections and long lines at many polling stations. State officials claimed 80 percent of eligible Cairo residents turned out to vote.

The elections came after a week of mass protests, triggered by the junta's violent crackdown on November 19 against families of martyrs of the revolution, and

during which security forces killed over 40 protesters. Millions of demonstrators protested in cities throughout the country, demanding the overthrow of the SCAF junta. They also protested elections held under emergency law and Islamist attempts to stir up hostility to Coptic Christians.

Voters' participation in the elections reflected a mixture of defiant determination to register their opinions against the US-backed junta and a general desire for change that overcame broad mistrust and disillusionment towards the state and the existing political parties.

One voter told the *New York Times*: "There is no justice, no integrity, no confidence. But I came because then I will have done my duty, so I will ask to claim my rights."

Another voter said, "The revolution started so that our voice has a value, so we have to do what we are supposed to do." However, she estimated that the chances of the elections producing a legitimate result were only 50 percent.

Some cited threats from the SCAF junta as their reason for voting. The junta said it would punish abstention from voting with a fine of 500 Egyptian pounds—US\$83, or over a month's wages for the majority of Egyptians who earn less than \$2 a day.

One office worker standing in a voting line said: "You think any of these candidates can change anything? Of course not. Ask anyone here—you wouldn't see these lines without the fine."

Several thousand protesters remaining on Tahrir Square on Monday were assaulted by security forces as they chanted slogans for a boycott of the elections. Videos showed police beating demonstrators and dragging one female protester through the streets by her hair. One protester, who had been shot in the eye by police with rubber bullets, said he did not trust the police to secure the elections: "No one was prosecuted or even accused of

killing and injuring many of us. How can people just move on?”

The Egyptian bourgeoisie—who were terrified by the protests and hoped that elections would provide a parliamentary fig leaf for the continuing hegemony of the military—were surprised at the turnout. Election commission leader Abdel-Mooazez Ibrahim called it “massive and unexpected.” Egypt’s main stock market index, the EGX30, rose 5.48 percent over the day, ending with a “sigh of relief,” according to the state-run *Al Ahram* newspaper.

SCAF member Major General Mukhtar al-Mulla praised the election as “unprecedented in the history of the Arab world’s parliamentary life.” He claimed it was the “first step in the path to a new democratic state.”

Initial results were unavailable, though the Muslim Brotherhood announced that it hopes to win 30 percent of the vote nationally and become the largest party in parliament. Another Islamist party, Ennadha, came in first in recent elections in Tunisia, where mass protests ousted another Western-backed dictator, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, shortly before the fall of Mubarak. (See, “Islamists claim victory in Tunisia’s Constituent Assembly elections”)

However, reporting from Alexandria, Egypt’s second-largest city and a base of the Muslim Brotherhood, *Al Ahram* wrote: “Some observers here believe that the MB’s chances of winning a majority of the seats might not be as strong as some predict because heavy voter turnout—expected to reach 50 percent of the eligible vote compared to only 23 percent in the 2005 contest—might work against the Brotherhood.”

Nonetheless, Islamist or other pro-business parties are set to dominate the election, under conditions, moreover, where top junta leaders have made clear they will tolerate no constitutional changes decreasing the army’s power.

This underscores the politically fraudulent character of the elections, widely discussed by Egyptian voters and protesters on Tahrir Square alike. The elections will formally hand over power to parties that were sidelined by the revolutionary upsurge of workers and youth that toppled Mubarak in February and that were hostile to its basic demands: social equality, better living standards and political freedom. The military—the backbone of the former Mubarak dictatorship—will also remain.

The main responsibility for this lies with various middle-class groups that form the “left” of the Egyptian political establishment: the Revolutionary Socialists, Socialist Renewal, and other similar tendencies. These groups

consistently supported joint actions or protests with the Islamist parties, thus boosting the right-wing forces of the Brotherhood, while promoting the view that workers could fight for their demands under SCAF rule.

Thus, RS leader Mustafa Omar commented that the SCAF junta “understands that the January 25 uprising [that led to Mubarak’s overthrow on February 11] has changed Egypt once and for all in certain ways... The Council aims to reform the political and economic system, allowing it to become more democratic and less oppressive.”

These forces ceded political initiative to the right and blocked any struggle by the working class to form its own institutions of state power and topple the junta. (See, “The counterrevolutionary role of the Egyptian pseudo-left”) They have given a breathing space to right-wing forces who will try to provide a new, parliamentary façade for the continued dictatorial rule and anti-worker policies of the Egyptian military.

Shadi Hamid, a research director at the Brookings Doha Center, told *Daily News Egypt*: “The Brotherhood in Egypt is run by doctors, engineers and rich businessmen, not by poor people... They have very capitalist economic policies, yet they speak very persuasively about social justice and they also provide help [i.e., charitable assistance] to poor civilians. That’s why people in the street are comfortable with them.”

Hamid added that the Brotherhood’s members had benefited from “economic openness... They are part of this new wave of businessmen. The Brotherhood is taking a page directly from the AKP [Islamist government] in Turkey, they are part of the business elite; they want to adopt the same principles as the AKP, which has a more conservative, right-wing approach.”

The formation of a parliament led by the MB or “liberal” business tycoons would only set the stage for explosive new struggles between the junta and its imperialist backers—now supported by Egypt’s official “opposition” parties in parliament—and the working class.



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