

Low turnout for run-offs in first wave of Egyptian elections

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Voters showed little interest Monday and yesterday in run-off races in nine Egyptian governorates organizing parliamentary elections, amid expectations of a victory by right-wing Islamist parties. These forces, the Muslim Brotherhood and the far-right Salafist Al Nour party, played no significant role in the mass working class uprising that ousted US-backed dictator President Hosni Mubarak in February.

The state-owned *Al Ahram* called voter turnout “minimal,” adding: “This time around, voters did not form long queues in front of polling stations, with turnout considerably less than it had been for last week’s contests.” This comes after estimates of voter participation in the first round of elections on November 28-29 were revised sharply downward. Two further sets of governorates will vote in late December and January.

The ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) junta organized the elections as an attempt to legitimize their continuing rule, amid repeated waves of mass protests and strikes against the Egyptian military dictatorship over the last year. The army initially claimed turnout was 70 percent, though the figure was later put at 62 percent. On Sunday, however, Election Commission chair Abdul Moiz Ibrahim said turnout was in fact only 52 percent; he blamed the error on his staff and on the fact that he was “very tired” while making the announcement.

Official results released Sunday on the first round of voting last week gave the Muslim Brotherhood-backed Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) 40 percent of the vote; Al Nour 24 percent of the vote; the liberal Egyptian Bloc and Al Wafd parties, with 14 and 11 percent of the vote, respectively; and the Revolution Continues bloc of Pabloite and youth parties 4 percent.

Based on these results, only four of the 56 parliamentary seats were awarded on the first round. Another 52 will be awarded after the results of the run-offs are known. Of the 52 run-offs, 24 are between electoral blocs led by the two

main Islamist parties, with the FJP participating in 23 run-offs against other parties.

Brotherhood leader Mohammed Badie spoke yesterday with private Al-Mehwar TV, promising not to challenge the junta. He said, “We must live in harmony not only with the military council, but with all of Egypt’s factions, or else the conclusion is zero. There will be reconciliation between the three powers: the parliament, the government, and the military ruling council.”

He downplayed the potential for conflict with the junta, saying, “They will not insist and we will not insist ... If there is a hair between us, we will not cut it.”

Badie’s pledges comes as Prime Minister Kamal al-Ganzouri—a former prime minister under Mubarak installed amid mass protests against the junta on November 24—finalizes his proposals for a cabinet. It is expected to be announced today.

The parliament currently being elected has no say in selecting or rejecting Ganzouri’s cabinet, and in fact has little real power. According to the junta’s 2011 Constitutional Declaration, even after the current elections are over, the junta will retain power to promulgate or object to legislation; to issue public policy for the state and the public budget; to appoint the appointed members of the People’s Assembly; to call and adjourn sessions of the People’s Assembly; and to sign international treaties and represent the Egyptian state abroad.

Despite the limited powers, the Islamists can currently expect to wield in parliament, anonymous sources told *Al Hayat* that their victory was causing “worry and discomfort” inside the SCAF. Western imperialism and the Egyptian bourgeoisie, who are grooming the Brothers as a potential governing party, are concerned that they may not be able to control working class opposition in coming social struggles.

In part, the junta worries that the Brotherhood—despite its attempts to maintain good relations with the junta and

present a “democratic” façade to public opinion—may ultimately find itself forced into a confrontation with Washington, the Egyptian army’s key backer.

US imperialism has held back-channel negotiations with the Brothers for decades. During mass protests against Mubarak in February, the Obama administration said it would allow the Brothers to play a role in Egypt, on condition that they “reject violence and recognize democratic goals.”

However, powerful sections of the American ruling class worry that the Brotherhood might find itself compelled by public opinion to limit Egypt’s close military cooperation with Washington. Egypt allows the US Navy to use the Suez Canal and Egyptian ports, and Egyptian intelligence routinely tortured detainees “rendered” to it by the CIA in the context of the US’s so-called “war on terror.” The US ruling elite would consider the most desperate measures to keep Egypt under Washington’s strategic control.

Shortly before Mubarak’s ouster, the Brookings Institution think tank wrote: “It would be hard, even silly, for the United States to provide over \$1 billion in military aid to a country that doesn’t want to be a US military partner, but ending this aid would further embitter the Brotherhood against continuing even limited security cooperation with the United States... Under the Brotherhood, intelligence cooperation would vanish as the new regime purged the hated security services and worried that the Central Intelligence Agency would seek a coup.”

The ruling classes are also concerned by the Brotherhood’s relations with the Salafists. The Brothers issued a statement on December 1 denying the existence of any “alleged alliance” with Al Nour. The *New York Times* wrote that this statement “appeared to be aimed at quieting the anxieties of Egyptian liberals and Western governments.”

The Salafists’ ultra-right views will provoke mass popular opposition. On December 5, Salafist politician Yasser Burhami gave an interview in which he said that Egyptian Coptic Christians should not have the right to run for political office in Egypt, and that he opposed allowing Egypt’s Baha’i community to hold religious festivals. Demands for Muslim-Christian unity were a prominent feature of the mass protests against Mubarak, however.

Salafist organizations in Egypt are closely connected to the reactionary Persian Gulf monarchies, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. A recent Egyptian

government report claimed that a leading Salafist organization, Al-Sunnah Al-Mohammadiya, received \$50 million this year from Qatar and Kuwait.

Such subsidies have allowed the Salafists to form charity networks rivaling those of the Brotherhood. These charities give the Islamist parties a certain popular appeal, which was the basis for the Islamists’ strong showing in the recent elections.

The central responsibility for the Islamists’ victory lies with the support given to them by the liberal and “left” forces, which did all they could to promote the Islamists during mass protests against Mubarak. (See “The counterrevolutionary role of the Egyptian pseudo-left”) Due to their hostility to a socialist struggle against Egyptian capitalism and world imperialism by the working class, these forces are still promoting the Islamists as allies in a struggle for “social justice.”

Newly elected liberal parliamentarian Amr Hamzawy told a news conference at the Journalists’ Syndicate, “I fully reject the Islamic scarecrow that was promoted by the previous regime. We can’t deny that there will be an Islamic majority in the parliament. That majority should be accompanied by a cooperating minority in order to implement democracy and achieve social justice.”

In fact, all indications speak to a coming counteroffensive by the junta and the Islamists against the working class. The financial press has issued repeated statements denouncing wage increases workers have won in Egypt and throughout the Middle East, amid the surge in strikes. Strikes in Egypt have doubled in the last year, with textile and government workers winning double-digit percentage wage increases.

The financial oligarchy in Egypt and internationally fully intends to return the workers to the levels of poverty seen under Mubarak. Barclays analyst Alia Moubayed told *Al Ahram*, “The trend of raising wages across the board, without reflecting increases in productivity, could undermine competitiveness.”

Egypt’s foreign currency reserves have fallen quickly as investors pull funds from Egypt, from \$36 billion to \$20 billion.



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