

Egyptian junta bans major Islamist candidates from presidential race

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Tuesday evening the Supreme Presidential Elections Commission (SPEC) announced it would uphold the ban on ten candidates for the Egyptian presidential elections scheduled for May 23 and 24.

On Saturday, the commission had disqualified, amongst others, the ultra-conservative Salafist candidate Hazem Salah Abu Ismail and the candidate of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood (MB), its deputy supreme guide Khairat al-Shater. The commission also disqualified Omar Suleiman, the former head of the Egyptian secret service, interior minister and vice-president under ousted dictator Hosni Mubarak.

The SPEC's decision to ban the major Islamist candidates from running for president is a further indication of a growing conflict between the Egyptian military and the Islamist groups, particularly the MB.

Initially, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), its backers in Washington, and the Islamists worked closely together to strangle the mass struggles by the Egyptian working class. After the ouster of longtime dictator Mubarak on February 11, the junta took power with the support of the Islamists. The MB and the Salafists then supported a law issued by the generals in March 2011 banning strikes and protests and backed virtually all the SCAF's decisions.

Now, Abu Ismail has been excluded from the presidential race on the grounds that his mother allegedly was a US citizen. According to the Egyptian electoral law, no candidate can run for president if he or his parents hold a foreign nationality. Ismail contested the claim as false, but the Egyptian foreign and interior ministries along with the US State Department claimed that Abu Ismail's mother had received a US passport before she died.

The commission also disqualified the MB's candidate and multi-millionaire businessman al-Shater,

accusing him of having belonged to a "banned group." Al-Shater had been arrested with other leading MB members in 2006, when the Mubarak regime started an offensive against its Islamist big-business rivals. A military court sentenced him to seven years in prison, accusing him of money laundering, supplying students with weapons and funding a "banned" group. He was released by the military junta soon after it took power, reportedly for health reasons.

Al-Shater's lawyers accused the SPEC of being in "a state of confusion" and making a "blatant error". They claimed that al-Shater had received a full judicial pardon, covering all charges against him. However, the SPEC turned down the appeals submitted by the disqualified candidates. Farouk Sultan, the head of the commission, stated: "All appeals have been rejected, because nothing new was offered in the appeal requests."

The SPEC consists of a body of judges appointed by the SCAF junta. Sultan himself is a former army officer and judge in the military court system. Some commentators hold the position that the SPEC took its decision to disqualify the candidates on behalf of the SCAF junta, which wanted in particular to get rid of al-Shater.

Al-Shater, a businessmen and former banker, represents as no other candidate could the economic and financial interests of the Brotherhood. He personally owns a huge business empire; his economic policies aim to attract more foreign investment and further privatize and liberalize the Egyptian economy. The military sees his economic program as a potential threat to its economic interests. The Egyptian army controls large parts of Egypt's economy; only recently, SCAF warned that it would "fight to defend our projects".

After their electoral gains in the parliamentary elections, which saw a low turnout after mass protests against military rule last November, the MB and its political arm, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), have taken a more confrontational stance towards the SCAF junta.

In a press conference Wednesday, al-Shater harshly criticized the junta. He attacked the junta's role after the November parliamentary elections, particularly its refusal to remove the interim government headed by Kamal Ganzouri and replace it with a national unity government, as demanded by Egypt's Islamist-controlled parliament. He claimed that SCAF is not ready to give up power and wants to continue ruling the country. "We are now facing an attempt to recreate the old regime," he said.

He described his elimination from the presidential race as "laughable" and criticized the SPEC and Sultan as defenders of the old regime. He also made clear that his elimination did not mean the MB's exclusion from the presidential race. After the junta objected to al-Shater's legal status, the MB decided to field a second candidate, FJP leader Mohamed Mursi.

Al-Shater said he would "continue fighting" and announced that the MB would participate in a planned Friday demonstration in Tahrir Square against the junta's recent decisions.

The increasing confrontation between the plutocratic Islamist elite and the US-sponsored military junta must serve as a stark warning to the Egyptian working class. The whole "democratic transition", as it is promoted by US-imperialism and the different factions of the Egyptian ruling elite—be it the army, the Islamists or liberal and petty-bourgeois "left" tendencies—is not a way for the Egyptian workers and youth to achieve their democratic and social aspirations. It is rather a counterrevolutionary mechanism to strangle the Egyptian Revolution and defend the predominance of capitalism and imperialism in Egypt and throughout the region.

In another step against the Islamists, the junta dissolved the committee for drafting the new constitution on Sunday. The majority of the committee was comprised of MB and Salafist members, due largely to their majority in parliament. The growing influence of the Islamists has been criticized by some liberal and petty-bourgeois "left" forces, as well as by

influential religious institutions like the Islamic Al-Azhar University and the Coptic Church.

On Sunday, the SCAF generals, led by Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, met with the heads of all political parties with seats in the parliament and announced the creation of a new committee representing "all sectors of the public". Tantawi reportedly said in the meeting that the presidential election will not be held before a new constitution is drafted.

Mustafa Al-Naggar, the leader of the centrist al-Adl party and former general coordinator of one-time presidential hopeful Mohamed ElBaradei, anxiously stated that setting aside elections would open the door for "mayhem that threatens the country's security ... It is a coup against the democratic transition. The people won't accept anyone ruling them without an election."



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