

# Low turnout in Egyptian presidential elections

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The initial round of the first presidential elections in Egypt after the revolutionary ouster of long-time US-stooge Hosni Mubarak, on May 23-24, was marked by low turnout and numerous electoral violations.

Held under the dictatorial rule of the US-backed Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) with emergency laws in place the first round of the elections was held at gunpoint with the army in full control of the polling stations. No official results or estimates were announced yet. However, various media reports indicate that none of the candidates was able to win an outright majority; a second round will therefore be held on June 16-17.

Based on previous polls, only five major candidates are likely to enter the run-offs. These include the major Islamist candidates Mohamed Mursi, the candidate of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and Abdel Moneim Abouel Fotouh who is supported by the Salafist Nour (Light) Party and the ultra-right-wing Islamist group al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya.

The candidates considered to be closest to the junta are Amr Moussa, a former minister under Mubarak and ex-leader of the Arab League and Ahmed Shafiq, the last prime minister under Mubarak. The fifth candidate who could make it to the second round is the Nasserist candidate Hamdeen Sabahi, the leader of the Karama (Dignity) Party.

SCAF has pledged to hand over power to a civilian government after a new president is sworn in but this is considered to be highly doubtful. The elections were held without a new constitution in place, and earlier this week, it was reported that the junta plans to issue a complementary constitutional declaration. According to political commentators, this declaration aims to codify the special status of the army and thus to ensure its continued domination of political life in Egypt.

The Egyptian political establishment, Western politicians, and the media all portrayed the elections as an important step towards democracy. US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland called the event “historic” and “stunning” as well as “a very important milestone for Egypt's transition.”

The European Union (EU) also praised the elections. The head of the European Parliament, German social-democrat Martin Schulz, stated that he will recognize and cooperate with the winner regardless of his political outlook.

Contrary to imperialist propaganda, the elections are not a step towards democracy and the realization of the revolutionary aspirations of the Egyptian masses. They are rather a means for the Egyptian ruling elite to install a president tasked with intensifying the counterrevolutionary measures against the Egyptian working class.

All approved candidates were handpicked by the SCAF junta and pose no threat to the Egyptian state machine, Egyptian capitalism, and imperialist rule in the Middle East. Candidates the junta feared most—including ultra-conservative Salafist Hazem Salah Abu Ismail and the initial candidate of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood (MB), Khairat al-Shater—were banned weeks before the elections.

Observers estimated the turnout to be lower than in last year's parliamentary elections, in which around 50 percent of the voters participated. According to Egyptian news reports, only 30 percent of all registered voters were casting a ballot until shortly before the closure of the polling stations. Farouk Sultan, the head of the official elections commission, estimated a turnout between 40 and 50 percent.

During and before the elections, the junta generals urged all Egyptians to do their duty and turn out to

vote. In the evening on both election days, voting hours were extended about two hours to 9 p.m.

Interim Prime minister Kamal al-Ganzouri gave civil servants a day off Thursday to enable them to cast their votes. The Grand Sheikh of the influential Islamic Al-Azhar University, Ahmed Al-Tayyeb, issued a statement declaring it forbidden for an “eligible voter with the ability” to vote to boycott the elections.

Despite the concerted efforts by the junta, the Egyptian ruling elite and its US backers, large sections of the Egyptian electorate obviously abstained nonetheless. While in some better-off areas in Cairo and other major cities where queuing lines were long, polling stations stayed more or less empty in poorer areas and in the countryside.

Live updates in the Egyptian media gave a picture of the situation. The *Egypt Independent* noted: “In Rafah, the North Sinai town on the border with Gaza, polling stations are empty and voter turnout is virtually nonexistent. In Sheikh Zuwayed, a city about 20 km away, turnout is also low.”

In El-Arish, the capital and largest city in the North Sinai, security forces outnumbered voters at some polling stations. “Turnout has not been strong yet. I would say it's not more than 20 percent. It's mostly old people,” stated Qotb al-Shalakany, a judge at the Yasser Primary School polling station in the city.

A reporter writing for *Al-Ahram Online* described the situation in the Qena governorate in Upper Egypt: “Qena is calm at the moment. The hot weather is affecting turnout but more voters are expected after 4 p.m. There is little enthusiasm for voting again in the run-offs in Qena because the majority of people here are very poor and they're fed up with these expensive presidential campaigns. They know the candidates are rich and have little in common with ordinary people.”

Electoral violations and suppression by the army and police were reported all over the country. Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (EOHR) reported that supporters of several candidates bribed voters in the governorates of Alexandria, Marsa Matrouh, Sharqia, Giza, Cairo, Qena, and West Fayoum.

In the coastal city of Alexandria, six activists were arrested by police for distributing flyers urging voters not to vote for *feloul* (former Mubarak regime officials). According to the April 6 Youth Movement, police detained three of its members in Port Said for

recording alleged election violations in the governorate.

Enthusiasm amongst voters about the elections was reportedly low, and there was widespread mistrust of the different candidates. *Egypt Independent* conducted interviews with voters from various backgrounds who said they would choose “the least bad” candidate.

Iman al-Tawil, a physician, stated that “we are not convinced of anyone, but we are only voting because this was the first dream of the martyrs.” Zeinab Saad, an engineer, described the event as “historic” but added that “its joy was spoiled ever since the parliamentary elections. They taught us that nothing good comes out of elections.”

During and after the first round of the elections, spokespersons of all the major candidates claimed their candidate was in the lead, or at least that they had reached the run-offs. Exit polls were released by various groups showing the different and biased results.

According to one poll by the Moussa campaign, Mursi came first with 26 percent of the votes and Moussa second with 25.3 percent. Shafiq finished third with 17.6 percent followed by Sabahi with 12.2 Fotouh with 10 percent. Other polls put Islamist candidates Mursi and Fotouh in the lead, leaving Sabahi, Shafiq and Moussa behind.



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