

Egyptian presidential elections marked by mass abstention and fraud

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A show of mass abstention was the Egyptian working class's verdict on the first presidential elections in Egypt after the revolutionary ouster of US-backed dictator Hosni Mubarak in February 2011.

In the run-offs over the weekend, Ahmed Shafiq, the last prime minister under ousted dictator Hosni Mubarak faced Mohamed Mursi, the candidate of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood (MB). Both Shafiq and Mursi are right-wing representatives of the Egyptian ruling class, hostile to the social and democratic aspirations of the Egyptian revolution and widely discredited amongst the Egyptian masses.

No official results and numbers about the voter turnout have been announced yet. However, media reports suggest that the turnout was even lower than in the initial round of the elections three weeks ago.

Ahram Online, the English website of the most widely circulated Egyptian newspaper, wrote: "The biggest story of the day is the apparent absence of voters. The Lawyers' Syndicate reported that only 15 percent of eligible voters hit the ballot boxes on Saturday. On Sunday, the turnout was even more lackluster."

The elections began only two days after the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) junta launched a military coup, dissolving the Islamist-dominated parliament and the constituent assembly tasked with the drafting of a new constitution. Backed by its imperialist allies in Washington and Europe, the junta seized full control of official Egyptian politics. These events exposed the "democratic transition" organized by the junta since the beginning of the Egyptian Revolution as a political fraud.

During the elections the Egyptian army was deployed in force throughout the country. Military helicopters circled over the major cities and heavily armed soldiers

"secured" polling stations. Soldiers reportedly filmed the polling stations, intimidating voters and journalists.

The elections were marred by fraud. The Shafiq campaign reportedly arranged for votes by military and police forces, who are not allowed to cast ballots. Vote buying was widespread and, as in elections under Mubarak, pre-marked ballots were handed out. Clashes between Shafiq and Mursi supporters were reported at various polling stations.

Both camps accused each other of vote rigging. Ahmed Sarhan, the media spokesperson of Shafiq's campaign, accused Mursi of pre-marking papers, particularly in the rural governorates. The Mursi campaign claimed that these accusations only aimed to conceal Shafiq's campaign violations. The general coordinator of the Mursi campaign, Ahmed Abdel Aaty, said that soldiers were called to vote for Shafiq in the Kafr el-Sheikh governorate.

The military junta officially claimed to be "impartial," but Thursday's coup further strengthened popular opinion that the junta sought to secure the election of Shafiq, an army general and Mubarak crony.

"Why should I vote? My vote doesn't count and the picture is very clear. They want Shafiq and they are going to make him the next president whoever we vote for," said Hussein, a taxi driver in Cairo. He described the elections as a "soap opera," explaining: "It is clear, they want Shafiq and they are forcing people to choose between him and the Brotherhood so that he can win."

Tanya El Kashef, an assistant editor for a lifestyle website, told the British *Guardian*: "I think the US-funded army picked out their president a while ago, and we're just playing along."

Despite threats by the authorities to fine everyone who does not fulfill his "patriotic duty" to vote, most Egyptians refused to cast a ballot for either candidate.

Ahmed Saad el-Deen, an architect in Sayedah Zeinab, a middle-class neighborhood in Cairo said: “It’s a farce. I crossed out the names of the two candidates on my ballot paper and wrote ‘the revolution continues.’ I can’t vote for the one who killed my brother or the second one who danced on his dead body.”

He explained that Shafiq was prime minister under Mubarak, during the infamous “battle of the camels” when Mubarak’s thugs attacked protesters in Tahrir Square, and that the MB closely collaborated with SCAF over the course of the past months.

Mohamed Abdel-Fatah Ali, from the working-class Cairo suburb of Ain Shams, explained his opposition to both candidates: “The Brotherhood are liars and cheats. We have Christians, so we need a civil state, not an Islamic one. As for Shafiq, he is the Mubarak sequel, a military man.”

Omar Abdel Aziz, a 24-year old youth, told the *Egypt Independent*: “A vote for Shafiq is a slap on the face of the martyrs, a vote for Mursi is a death sentence for the country. How can I vote?”

Among voters who decided to cast a ballot, mistrust was widespread. Asmaa Fadil, waiting to cast a ballot in Sayedah Zeinab, said she had lost confidence in the whole “democratic transition,” particularly after the coup: “I don’t trust the whole thing. I feel everything is planned in advance, and what we are doing now is just part of the plan.”

With the coup and the orchestrated elections, the generals are seeking to intimidate and ultimately to suppress all opposition in the working class, the main force behind the revolution against Mubarak last year. At any price, the Egyptian ruling elite seeks to prevent a repetition of the initial days of the revolution when mass strikes and protest shook the cornerstones of the Egyptian bourgeois state and the generals felt that they could not rely on the soldiers to crush the mass protests.

One day before the coup, the interior ministry, headed by major general Mohammed Ibrahim, issued a decree allowing the police, military police and state intelligence to detain civilians who are “harmful to the government,” “destroy property,” “resist orders” or “obstruct traffic.”

On Sunday night the SCAF issued an addendum to the military’s March 30, 2011 constitutional declaration, further expanding the army’s dictatorial powers. The amendments hand over all legislative and

budgetary powers to the SCAF, and also allow the SCAF to determine the composition of the constituent assembly that will be tasked with drafting the new constitution.

The amended article 53 aims to secure the military’s political and economic interests. It specifies that “the incumbent SCAF members are responsible for deciding on all issues related to the armed forces, including appointing its leaders and extending the terms in office of the aforesaid leaders. The current head of the SCAF is to act as commander-in-chief of the armed forces and minister of defense until a new constitution is drafted.”

Article 53b allows the army to intervene to crush any mass protests that challenge the authority of the generals: “If the country faces internal unrest which requires the intervention of the armed forces, the president can issue a decision to commission the armed forces—with the approval of SCAF—to maintain security and defend public properties.” Current Egyptian law sets the powers of the armed forces and their authorities in cases where the military can use force, or arrest or detain protesters.



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