

Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood claims constitutional referendum victory amid mass abstention

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On Saturday the second and final round of voting on Egypt's draft constitution took place in the 17 remaining governorates in Egypt. These included Egypt's third largest city Giza; the Suez Canal cities Port Said, Suez and Ismailia; the Nile Delta governorate of Menoufiya; and rural areas such as Beheira, Kafr El-Sheikh, Damietta, Minya, Beni Suef and Fayoum.

Before any official results were announced, the ruling Muslim Brotherhood (MB) declared victory. It cynically congratulated "all Egyptians" on its website for "64 percent 'Yes' initial overall results," claiming that "only 36 percent seem to have said 'No' to the basic law." The statement thanked "the brave men of the armed forces and police who have succeeded in securing the voting process." It also declared its aim to "reunite national forces...in order to achieve stability in this homeland and to complete its constitutional institutions."

The referendum was a mockery of democratic process. As in the first round of voting on December 15, the vote was held at gunpoint—over 250,000 military and police forces secured the polling stations—and marked by a low voter turnout and allegations of fraud.

Reportedly only about eight million of 25 million eligible voters cast ballots—a turnout of about 30 percent. In the first round, some 32 percent of eligible voters had participated.

With a total voter turnout of 31.7 percent, the referendum saw by far the lowest turnout of all polls held in Egypt since the ouster of former dictator Hosni Mubarak by mass revolutionary struggles in February last year. In the March 2011 constitutional referendum, turnout was 41 percent. In the runoffs of the

presidential elections, 49 percent of all eligible voters cast a ballot.

The low turnout followed a series of mass protests against Mohamed Mursi and the Muslim Brotherhood. It highlighted the ever-widening gulf separating the working class from the official parties of the Egyptian bourgeoisie—be it the Islamists or the secular liberal and "left" opposition—who all called upon voters to participate in the referendum.

Some voters showed up at the polling station to express their contempt for the fraudulent election process and the ruling "Brotherhood regime". Tamer Radwan, a spokesperson of the "martyr's families" group in Suez, who lost his brother during the revolution, told *Al Ahrām* that he wrote "Down, down with the Brotherhood's rule" on his ballot paper.

Widespread fraud was reported. The Egyptian news web site *Egypt Independent* reported that the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), the MB's political arm, bused village residents of remote areas to the polling stations and instructed them to vote "yes". According to media reports, violations included the absence of phosphoric ink in the polling stations, the deliberate shutdown of polling stations, and ballot box stuffing with prestamped ballot papers.

The April 6 Youth Movement released a statement, accusing the MB and its supporters of "committing electoral violations during the second round similar to the first round." According to *Ahrām Online*, the statement accused the Islamists of "banning rival voters from entering the polling stations and assaulting members of the opposition."

With the new constitution, the Egyptian ruling class seeks to consolidate dictatorial rule in Egypt, to carry

out further attacks on the working class and prepare for intensified repression of any resistance from below. It is a shattering refutation of those who argued that the Egyptian capitalist class, working with American imperialism and its European allies, would gradually create a prosperous, democratic society. In fact, the Egyptian ruling class and its imperialist allies are working to strengthen the position of the most repressive political forces, the army and the Islamist parties.

The constitution begins by praising the Armed Forces and later enshrines all its privileges and power. Article 195 states that the defense minister must be an officer of the Egyptian army. Article 197 approves a National Defense Council (NDC)—a body headed by the president but dominated by the leadership of the army—that is “responsible for matters pertaining to the methods of ensuring the safety and security of the country and to the budget of the Armed forces.”

The NDC is thus free of parliamentary control and has the power to proclaim a military dictatorship. It oversees any laws relating to the military and can grant further unspecified powers to the army. Article 198 permits military trials of civilians “for crimes that harm the Armed Forces.”

The constitution also paves the way for the further Islamization of Egypt by keeping Article 2 of the 1971 constitution, which states that the “principles of Islamic law [*shari'a*] are the principal source of legislation.”

On Saturday Mursi appointed 90 new members to the Shura Council, the upper house of parliament, which will be handed legislative powers until new parliamentary elections. The vast majority of the appointees are representatives of the MB and its Islamist allies, the Salafist Nur and Assala Parties, the moderate Wasat Party, and the ultrareactionary al-Gamaa al-Islamiyya and its political arm, the Construction and Development Party. One of the new members is Safwat Abdel Ghany, one of al-Gamaa’s chief ideologues, was accused of killing the former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981. He has also been charged with ordering the 1992 murder of renowned Egyptian writer Farag Fouda from his prison cell.

The socioeconomic calculations behind the drive to bolster the state’s repressive powers were laid out by Amr Adly, an Egyptian economic expert and head of

the Economic and Social Justice Unit at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights. He told Reuters, “For austerity measures to be made at a time when the political system is being opened and millions of people are being enfranchised, you need political consensus within the political class.”

Last week, the international rating agency Moody’s warned Egypt that any further delay of the US\$4.8 billion IMF loan could further damage Egypt’s credit rating. The United States also urged Egypt to reach an agreement “as quickly as possible.” The Mursi regime is preparing to further privatize the Egyptian economy and cut subsidies for fuel and bread, on which masses of impoverished Egyptians depend.

The opposition National Salvation Front (NSF) signaled that it would accept the results of the referendum. The NSF—the umbrella group of liberal and bourgeois “left” opposition parties led by former UN official Mohamed ElBaradei, the Nasserite Hamdeen Sabahi and ex-Mubarak regime official Amr Moussa—thus dropped the objections it had raised to the further Islamization of the state.

Speaking to *Al-Ahram*’s Arabic language site, Sabahi stated: “Legally speaking, the front will respect the result of the referendum in all cases but politically, the front’s attitude is known; we refuse the constitution that was made by a majority of Islamists.”

The NSF alleged that there were “irregularities” in the vote. Opposition spokesman Amr Hamzawy said, “We are asking the commission to investigate the irregularities before announcing official results.”

According to *Egypt Independent*, the FJP invited the NSF on Sunday evening “to an unconditional comprehensive dialogue over how to approach Egypt’s problems in the coming months.” Mohamed al-Beltagy, a leading MB figure, said that both sides will find a consensus in the coming months, suggesting that next Friday should be “a day of national reconciliation and give each other flowers.”



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