

Egypt: Millions cast their votes in the first post-Mubarak elections

But military-controlled elections do not signal transition to democracy

Niall Mulholland

Long queues formed at many polling stations, on 28 November, in Cairo and other Egyptian cities and towns. Millions voted in the first elections since the former dictator, president Hosni Mubarak, was overthrown by a mass revolutionary movement last February.

The election timetable lasts until March 2012, with the first phase running until January and electing a 498-member lower house of parliament. Its main function is to form a committee to draft Egypt's new constitution.

Many who voted are highly sceptical about the aims of the ruling military junta, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which claims to be "overseeing the transition to democratic rule". The regime reportedly threatened those who boycotted the poll with fines.

There were reports of 'numerous local violations' at polling stations mainly involving the Muslim Brotherhood. Dozens of candidates from new independent unions were disqualified from standing under the old regime's laws, which require workers' candidates to be nominated by Mubarak's stooge 'Egyptian Trade Union Federation'.

At the same time, after decades of dictatorship, many voters went to the polls desperately yearning for democratic rights and to see real social and economic change.

"People in Tahrir Square told us to boycott these elections because the new parliament will be controlled by the military council", one 19 year old voter told the Guardian (29/11/11). "I think they might be right. But that doesn't change the fact that, for the first time, I'm about to tick a box..."

A high turnout was reported in Cairo's poor areas. A first-time voter told reporters she was "voting for freedom...We lived in slavery. Now we want justice in freedom".

Military

In the run up to the elections, huge protests took place in Tahrir Square, Cairo, and in cities and towns across the country, culminating in millions taking to the streets after Friday prayers on 25 November.

Courageous youth, some from the poorest slums, defied lethal police violence. The protesters demanded Egypt's military rulers are immediately removed, lifting the state of emergency, freeing all political detainees and prisoners, a boycott of the military's fraudulent election, and for real democracy, jobs and social change.

The February revolution overthrew Hosni Mubarak but months of military rule since led many Egyptians to conclude that the ruling elite will do everything to retain power. The military tops, who control up to 40% of the economy, jailed and tortured thousands, attacked demonstrations and provoked sectarian conflict.

Britain, the US and other western imperialist countries, still trying to keep Egypt as a regional ally, have made the mildest of criticisms of field marshal Tantawi and SCAF.

In September, there were massive strikes for better living standards and for democratic rights. The military's plans to impose a sham electoral and constitutional 'process', in

order to keep power, provoked November's new uprising.

The prestige and authority of the army has evaporated in the eyes of millions of Egyptians. Many protesters now call for a 'second revolution'. By doing so, they have come into conflict with opposition political parties, including the Muslim Brotherhood leadership, which opposed the street protests and wanted to see the 28 November elections go ahead.

Muslim Brotherhood

The Brotherhood, which is the best organised party (under the name, Freedom and Justice Party), is expected to be the biggest beneficiary from the first round of elections.

It has support amongst the poor and sections of the working class because of its welfare programmes and the repression it faced under the Mubarak regime. The Brotherhood and other Islamist parties play on people's "craving for security and tangible improvements to their lives".

However, the revolutionary youth express revulsion towards any political opposition that is willing to collaborate with the military junta. Parliamentary candidates' posters were ripped down by protesters in Cairo, last week, and a Muslim Brotherhood leader was heckled by protesters in Tahrir Square and forced to leave.

The Brotherhood leadership conceded to the SCAF's 'timetable' to civilian rule - putting off 'elections' for months on end - and even held talks with the generals while youth were being shot down by police in the streets. The tacit agreement between the Brotherhood and the generals has exposed the real reactionary nature of the political Islamist party to ever greater numbers of Egyptians.

The military junta was forced to make concessions in the face of last week's mass protests, including bringing forward presidential elections. Its public support plummeted and its room to manoeuvre narrowed. It is reported that the generals only appointed Kamal el-Ganzouri - a former ally of Mubarak - as 'interim prime minister' last

week because no other political figure would agree to fill the role.

Political vacuum

The regime hopes to isolate the mass of protesters from the wider population, by leaning on more conservative and passive sections of society.

While most Egyptians opposed the regime's brutal assault on protesters last week, the ongoing political, social and economic crisis, and lack of a credible alternative showing a way out, led many, including those that supported the February revolution, to hold back from throwing their full weight behind the recent street protests.

The youthful protesters, however, have no faith in SCAF promises to introduce 'democracy' and to step down from power. They see that the end result of months of SCAF-controlled elections will be a parliamentary façade while the military rule continues to really pull strings, backed by imperialism.

Neither can the masses put any trust in the idea of a 'national unity' or 'salvation' government - which is promoted by some opposition groups. Such a regime would be made up of elements from the army and various pro-capitalist opposition parties that are no threat to the vital interests of the ruling elite.

Youth and workers in Tahrir Square and elsewhere are organising themselves and heroically resisting the military regime. But a new independent working class political force, with broad appeal among the masses, has not yet emerged.

There is a political gulf in society that needs to be filled by workers and youth organising their own mass party, with an independent class programme. This can involve, for example, genuine independent trade unions and students' organisations that have consistently struggled to continue the revolution.

So far, the organised working class has not yet put its stamp decisively on recent events. It is mass workers' action, such as strikes and the general strike, which played a crucial role in ousting Mubarak, that can also now overthrow the SCAF and the whole rotten, brutal regime.

A mass socialist opposition in

Egypt could successfully oppose a constitution approved or drawn up by the military and instead call for the rapid election of a real democratic parliament, a revolutionary constituent assembly, which not only agrees rules for elections but also a programme to change the conditions of the Egyptian masses.

Such a parliament can only be convened - if it is really to represent the majority population - under the control of democratic workplace and neighbourhood committees. Genuinely democratic representatives of workers and poor farmers should form the majority in this parliament or constituent assembly.

Programme

Such a government would take immediate action against counter-revolution and for democratic rights and steps to improve living standards.

It would nationalise all the major companies and banks under democratic workers' control, so that the economy could be planned in the interests of the big majority of the population, instead of being run for benefit of the rich.

This would entail breaking with capitalism, casting off imperialism, and carrying through the socialist transformation of Egypt, as part of an international struggle for socialism.

The struggle between revolution and counter-revolution continues as the working class strives to complete what it began on 25 January - winning full democratic, social and economic freedoms.

As the military-controlled election process and a new 'parliament' and constitution fail to deliver these demands, disillusionment will set in among the masses, including many of those who enthusiastically voted this week. Class differences will sharpen and intensify. This will open up great possibilities for a new workers' party to gain mass support with a socialist programme that is linked to the daily needs of millions of workers and poor.

Interview with Wael Towfeek, Revolutionary Left activist in Tahrir Square, Cairo - see www.socialistworld.net

The Committee for a Workers' International

The Committee for a Workers' International (CWI) is the socialist international organisation to which the Socialist Party is affiliated. The CWI is organised in 45 countries and works to unite the working class and oppressed peoples against global capitalism and to fight for a socialist world. For more details including CWI publications write to: CWI, PO Box 3688, London E11 1YE. email cwi@worldsoc.co.uk

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