



# Egypt: Fake elections will not halt rising social tensions

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On 7 September Egypt held its first multi-candidate presidential vote. To no one's surprise, president Hosni Mubarak won his fifth six-year term in office. Also no surprise that the US was the first country to endorse the ballot, claiming it was "a historic departure".

But the real story is that most Egyptians themselves viewed the ballot as fraudulent. Indeed, they boycotted it. A sign of the growing confidence of the Egyptian opposition Kifiya movement is that over 3,000 people demonstrated in Cairo against the rigged poll on election day itself: by far the largest crowd the movement has ever mobilised. Given the foreign media attention, heavy police surveillance stopped short of beating and dispersing the demonstrators with tear gas.

While government claims of a 79 per cent turnout were universally derided, the expected official figures of a 30 per cent turnout (in a country where voting is compulsory!) also appear to be generous. Newspapers estimated around 20 per cent, while second-placed candidate Ayman Nour estimated 10-15 per cent voted in the countryside and as few as three to five per cent in the cities.

Independent observers reported very slow polling. According to Al-Jazeera corruption was widespread: "Forced voting, paid voters, unmanned polling stations, missing indelible ink and the use of public transport to ferry voters to polling stations were only some of the accusations against Mubarak's National Democratic Party. Independent monitors reported a litany of irregularities at polling stations, complaining they had been beaten, apprehended and interrogated by security services in several places."

International observers were not allowed to witness the process. The compliant election commission proclaimed the result "fair" while not denying "irregularities". But then, this is the same commission that "excluded 1,700 judges from observing the presidential election on the grounds that they had not submitted their names in the lists issued. Sources said the excluded judges had adopted anti-government positions..." (Al-Jazeera).

The reason for the electorate's apathy, however, is not simply fraud. At root, the Egyptian masses took the only available course to show their displeasure at the hugely unpopular regime of Hosni Mubarak, and to protest against his refusal to allow his main opponents, most importantly the Muslim Brotherhood, to stand. Only two of the nine opposing candidates, Numan Gomaa of the traditional bourgeois Wafd Party, and Nour, a relatively unknown youthful candidate of the Ghad (or Tomorrow) Party represented any real forces.

Mubarak, 77, has been in power for 24 years. His regime is a loyal servant of imperialism in the Middle East, particularly the US from which it receives nearly \$2 billion a year. It is along with Jordan and Mauritania the only Arab state that has formal diplomatic ties with Israel. Mubarak has ruled for the entire time with the provisions of the 1981 "Emergency Laws" in operation. These allow the state to indefinitely detain without trial all political opponents.

The huge majority of the nearly 70 million people in Egypt, meanwhile, live in poverty. Per capita income is at just \$1,200 per annum and, while official unemployment stands at around 10 per cent, it is widely believed to be twice that. Privatisations have helped to swell the stock exchange and profit margins, while other neoliberal measures have hit subsidies on basic foodstuffs and fuel, while granting tax cuts for the rich. Mubarak's increasingly closeness to the US and Israel has also angered the population.

Neither Wafd nor Ghad parties objected to any of this economic programme. The only change of policy they offered was to get rid of the Emergency Laws. While this is an important demand - it is estimated that over 20,000 people have been murdered by the state in the last 24 years - it is clearly not the only source of hatred for Mubarak's rule.

There has been a rise in mass opposition against the regime and growing discontent among layers of Egypt's bourgeoisie and middle classes, as well as the working class. Given decades of dictatorship and the terrible betrayal of Egypt's strongest working class party - the Stalinist Communist Party - mass protest sentiments are often channelled into various bourgeois and petty-bourgeois movements.

This is particularly true for the Muslim Brotherhood - a conservative Islamist movement founded in 1928. It was bloodily suppressed under the Nasser regime in the 1950s and has been outlawed since then. Today it claims to have an active membership of two million and support from another three more million in Egypt. It has offices across the whole country and 15 members in parliament, who stood as independents.

The Muslim Brotherhood has become a socially reactionary, populist mass force similar to the Islamist forces in Turkey in the 1990s (before they came into government). It refrains from organising violent opposition to the government and, while the regime regularly arrests some of its activists, it has by and large a semi-legal existence. At the same time, more radical and partly terrorist Islamist organisations are growing in the huge slum areas of Cairo and southern Egypt.

But there are also a number of progressive parties whose influence is growing. Several of them have formed the Egyptian Movement for Change, which is popularly known as Kifaya (Enough). It has organised a number of street protests this year and gained significant publicity. Networks of local groups have spread widely over the past year or two. Kifaya was one of the main forces present at the third Cairo Anti-war Conference, which met in March this year, where over 1,000 activists discussed not just opposition to the imperialist occupation of Iraq, but how the Egyptian movement could end Mubarak's reign.

But only candidates who are no challenge for the regime were allowed to stand against Mubarak. The strongest party - the Muslim Brotherhood who would probably become the strongest force in free elections - could not stand a candidate.

This is why the League for the Fifth International agrees with those Egyptian forces who called for a boycott of the election. While the rigged elections will not change the regime, the growing opposition to Mubarak demonstrate the changed political and social conditions.

Socialists, workers and activists in Kifaya must continue to protest against the worsening economic situation and demand greater political freedom such as the right to organise politically and in trade unions which are independent of government control. They must carry on the fight for the abolition of the Emergency Laws and free and fair elections. But the masses of Egypt need more than any reform of the present system can give. To achieve democracy will require a revolutionary constituent assembly to sweep away all the elements of the Mubarak dictatorship and address the crying needs of the workers, the unemployed, the rural poor at the expense of the foreign investors, the businessmen and the landowners. But above all socialists must do all they can to make a breakthrough to Egypt's workers who today need an independent working class party which can lead the struggle for democracy and link this inseparably to the socialist revolution.

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