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TEIM Election Watch Analysis

OCCASIONAL ANALYSIS:

EGYPT/ Egypt looks ahead?

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For the first time in the recent history of the country, Egyptians were called to participate in what was considered a free and fair ballot process to decide on the amendment of nine articles of the current constitution¹.

The nationwide referendum was crowned with success. A total of 18.5 million voters out of an estimated 45 million who were eligible, or 41.2 percent², turned out for Egypt's first poll after Hosni Mubarak's resignation.

Long queues of voters wrapped around polling stations for the referendum on a package of proposed constitutional amendments. Many Egyptian citizens voted for the first time. "This is the first time that I participate in a poll. I came today to support change," said Mona Farahat, 65 years old. "It's an excellent experience. It's very organised. For the first time I see a huge number of women coming to vote"³. The streets were filled with Egyptians excited about the political advances of their country.

The final results showed 77.2 percent of Egyptians (approximately 14.2 million) approved the proposed amendments, while 22.8 percent (approximately 4 million) rejected them. The stance of the majority is clear and indisputable, especially since nobody has questioned the transparency of the ballot process⁴. Still, doubts over the correctness of this decision have been raised, taking into consideration that the approval of the amendments opened the way for the parliamentary and presidential elections, scheduled respectively for September and November 2011.

One of the first questions to be seen is what the Egyptians were really asked to decide on? Officially, the Egyptian citizens were called to express their opinion on the immediate reform of nine constitutional articles. Yet rather than a choice about constitutional amendments, post-revolutionary Egypt was asked to make a virtual decision between stability-continuity and instability-rupture with the old regime. Evidently, stability won and for many this represents a defeat for the revolutionary forces.

In the first place, it should be taken into account that the proposed constitutional amendments were to all intents and purposes composed by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. The twenty members of the Council are certainly not disconnected from the previous regime, since they served as the military forces under Mubarak's leadership. Notable among these are: Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi, Minister of Defence and Commander-in-chief of the Egyptian Armed forces since 1991; Lt. Gen. Sami Hafez Anan, Armed Forces Chief of Staff, named Chief of Staff in 2005; and Air Marshal Reda Mahmoud Hafez Mohamed, the air force chief, who occupied several posts, including the head of operations of the Air Defence Forces in 2001⁵.

It was this group of military officers heading the transition period who chose the 11-member committee of experts who drafted and edited the

¹ The proposed constitutional amendments can be consulted in English at <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2011/1039/eg22.htm>

² In previous elections, a turnout of around four to five million voters, or 10 to 15 percent of the electorate, was the norm. Many of them were bussed in by the government and paid for their efforts.

³ <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/node/363935>

⁴ The complaints in their majority regard the unpreparedness of the Egyptian state apparatus to receive the huge number of voters. This included problems such as the lack of stamped voting sheets and indelible ink, an adequate number of voting ballots, and not allowing monitors to observe the vote counting. The citizens were called to vote with their ID cards instead of voting cards, in order to allow all officially registered Egyptians to participate in the process.

⁵ You can consult the entire list of the Council's members at http://www.sis.gov.eg/En/LastPage.aspx?Category_ID=1136

constitutional amendments. Furthermore, these proposals were announced in February 25th without public discussion.

Another factor that should be taken into consideration is the strategy followed by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces regarding the referendum: the "Yes" option was combined with a clear statement of what would follow if that option became the people's choice, whereas the "No" option was treated as the cause of future uncertainty⁶. The choice was seen therefore as 'stability' vs. 'instability'.

The approval of the constitutional agreements, thus for many, underscored the strength of established political organisations and actors connected with the *ancien regime*. Beside the officers, the Muslim Brotherhood and National Democratic Party supported the amendments as a means to increase or maintain their influence in post-revolutionary Egypt.

The benefits for the National Democratic Party in holding immediate elections are clear, as the clientelist mechanisms of the former governing party, as well as the politics of fear, will help the party to gain votes. The Muslim Brotherhood's⁷ position on the other hand needs some specification. The protagonist role of the Brotherhood during Mubarak's mandate as the main opposition force would probably be progressively lost in a more open political environment as new opposition forces will be established and will engage with voters. Immediate elections will thus additionally allow the Muslim Brotherhood to mobilise its clientelist networks.

It thus becomes evident that constitutional amendments were supported and drafted⁸ by the most conservative elements of the Egyptian political forces. On the contrary, the amendments were not welcomed by the rest of the organised opposition forces, such as the liberal Wafd Party and leftist Tagammu Party, parties which had a cosmetic role during Mubarak's mandate, nor by the newcomers Mohamed ElBaradei⁹ and Amr Moussa, candidates for the forthcoming presidential elections.

Disapproval of the constitutional amendments was also expressed by the majority of young activists, who tried for weeks to convince the Supreme Council for a longer transitional period before elections, on the grounds that early elections would benefit the Brotherhood and the old governing party. Their claims went unheard both by the officers and by the voters, a fact that underlined their weakness¹⁰.

Are Egyptians therefore conservatives? Maybe. After all, it is not usual for societies to choose uncertainty over stability. But is this the only explanation for the massive 'yes' on the constitutional amendments?

The appeal of Egyptians' religious and anti-American feelings probably explains the decision of the majority. The Muslim Brotherhood as well as other Islamic factions, such as the Salafists and al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya played a catalyst role in this sense as their main slogan was: '*If you vote no you are a follower of America and Baradei, and if you vote yes you are a follower of God*'. A

⁶ Article of A. Swelam in al ahram available at <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentP/4/8622/Opinion/Egypt%E2%80%99s-referendum-Why-%E2%80%9CNo%E2%80%9D-lost-and-what-to-do-ne.aspx>

⁷ We refer to the organisation's official stand as it is expressed by its leadership.

⁸ There are rumours that a member of the Brotherhood participated in the committee that drafted the amendments.

⁹ ElBaradei was attacked by a mob when he went to cast his ballot, fleeing a shower of rocks and bottles. His supporters said the mob was paid.

¹⁰ Representatives of the activists complained that they had often been kept off the influential state-run television so that they could not present their point of view.

statement from the Egyptian Coalition for Monitoring Elections is clear regarding this point. *"The majority of Egyptians voted according to the perspective that it was about whether they agree to keep Article Two (which says that Islam is the source of legislation) in the constitution or to remove it,"* said Abu Saeda of the Andalus Institute for Tolerance and Anti-violence Studies¹¹.

In parallel, the widespread idea "that Muslims will vote yes and Copts and atheists will vote no"¹² was determinant for the 'yes' vote, in a period of escalated violence between the two communities. It should not be forgotten that during clashes between Christians and Muslims, eleven people died last March in suburbs of Cairo, in the deadliest confrontation since Mubarak's resignation¹³.

Last, but certainly not least, it is necessary to underline that the majority of 'no' votes came from Cairo and Alexandria, whereas the 'yes' votes emerged mainly from the provinces. According to Hellyer¹⁴, a fellow at the University of Warwick and the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, "the revolution was a revolution of the big cities,"... "The provinces are just not there. The secular values that drove the revolution have not reached them."

In this referendum, Egyptians clearly stated their opinion. But the road for change is long and hazardous. Not without reason Ashraf Swelam¹⁵, director of Egypt's International Economic Forum, worries that Egypt's upcoming elections "will most likely (and unfortunately) be about individuals, not political agendas".

¹¹ See: <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/8892/Egypt/Politics-/Monitors-concerned-by-referendum-violations,-buoye.aspx>

¹² See: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/21/world/middleeast/21egypt.html>

¹³ The clashes broke out after Christian protests over the burning of a church a week earlier.

¹⁴ Quoted at <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/node/372773>

¹⁵ Quoted at <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentP/4/8622/Opinion/Egypt%E2%80%99s-referendum-Why-%E2%80%9CNo%E2%80%9D-lost-and-what-to-do-ne.aspx>