

EGYPT: Second Round of Voting Takes Place in Egypt

The second round of voting in the second phase of Egypt's staggered electoral process began on Wednesday morning. The first round ended on 6 December, and the results placed the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) and the Salafi Al-Nour Party as the top two political parties, making a combined gain of nearly 70% of the contested seats¹. The FJP is generally considered a more moderate Islamist party than Al-Nour, the majority of whose followers adhere to an ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam derived from Wahhabism.

Voting Marred by Allegations of Irregularities

According to news reports, there may have been irregularities in the voting process, with electoral officials apparently telling voters how to vote. The reports come as the election moves to the more rural parts of Egypt that have historically tended to favour conservative Islamic candidates.² However, both liberal parties and members of the Muslim Brotherhood are said to have lodged accusations of electoral fraud.

According to one report, election officials filled out the ballot papers of elderly or confused voters. However, Abdel Moneim al-Halawani, an election commission official, refuted allegations of fraud in this instance, stating that officials were merely "helping illiterate voters".

In another incident, a military officer at the polling station in al-Agouza neighborhood in Giza reported that a representative from the Muslim Brotherhood had accused a judge of instructing voters to vote for a competing party. The judge subsequently filed a police complaint against the representative, who was escorted to the nearby police station for investigation. A liberal party representative at the same polling station also accused volunteers of paying voters to choose Islamist candidates.

In Dokki District, The Egyptian Current, a youth party, reported that officials at polling centres that were heavily adorned with ultra-conservative Islamist party banners were seen filling out ballot papers for voters. Another secular alliance of mostly liberal youth parties called Revolution Continues reported that its representatives in the Suez Canal city of Ismailia were thrown out of polling centres after complaining that officials were telling voter who to vote for.³

Greater Influence of Religion in Future Egypt

The electoral gains made by the Islamist parties have raised fears of a greater focus on religious issues by the next government, and even of the introduction of strict Shari'a law.⁴ These fears have been further stoked by news reports of comments made by Salafi leaders regarding the introduction of possible restrictions on tourist activities, including separated beaches for males and females, no alcohol and general respect for a more conservative culture. To a certain extent the Muslim Brotherhood appear to support these ideals, but have attempted to be more pragmatic on this issue, mainly due to the negative impact they may have on Egypt's important tourism economy.

¹ http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/stories/M/ML_EGYPT?SITE=INKEN&SECTION=HOME&TEMPLATE=DEFAULT – Sourced from AP News

² <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/12/14/world/africa/egypt-elections/index.html>

³ <http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/2011/dec/15/accusations-flare-as-egyptians-vote-in-2nd-round/?print&page=all>

⁴ Op Cit fn1

Sectarian violence in Sohag

Two Christians were killed, three others were injured and multiple homes and businesses owned by Christians were attacked and burned in El Gharziyat, Sohag Governorate, on 29 November. The attacks were retribution for the death of a Muslim man killed by a Christian man during a dispute. According to media accounts, the men were fighting over the construction of a wall when the Christian man struck the Muslim on the head with a sharp object. Security forces intervened to protect the local church but did not stop attacks on Christians and other property. No arrests have been reported. According to the news agency AINA, the family of the murdered Christians has temporarily come out of hiding to speak of the terror they have been subjected to and decry the impunity enjoyed by the killers, who are walking freely in the village.

Prominent Bloggers still Jailed; “Occupy” Activists Poisoned, Assaulted and Detained

On Wednesday, the Military Court of Appeals fined and sentenced blogger and activist Maikel Nabil to two years imprisonment. Charges leveled against him included insulting the armed forces, publishing false news and disturbing public security. He has now been on hunger strike for 113 days, and is currently surviving on milk and water. The two-year sentence has been condemned by local and international human rights organisations, who are demanding Mr Nabil’s immediate and unconditional release. In addition, the Freedom and Justice Party has denounced the sentence, stressing on Twitter that “no-one should be tried for expressing opinion.”

The following day, a judge representing the public prosecutor’s office agreed to release 27 of 28 people arrested in connection with violence at Maspero on 9 October, when the military and police attacked unarmed protesters, the majority of whom were Copts. They had been charged with the murder of a soldier, the theft of guns from the armed forces, and damaging private and public property. Prominent blogger and activist Alaa Abd El Fattah was the only member of the group not to be released.

On Wednesday, over 30 of the protesters who have been camped outside the Cabinet headquarters in Cairo since 25 November in a sit-in known as “Occupy Cabinet” were rushed to hospital in a fleet of ambulances suffering from food poisoning after being offered a free meal by mysterious benefactors. Occupy Cabinet was a protest against the appointment of the Mubarak-era politician Kamal El Ganzouri as prime minister. At the time of writing, the Egyptian military forcibly were evacuating protesters by severely assaulting them with plastic batons and firing rubber bullets. Several protestors are reported to have been detained.