

# 'What constitution?'

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[Shaden Shehab](#) examines what really went on on referendum day

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There were few surprises during Monday's referendum. As in previous polls a majority of Egyptians refrained from voting. This time, though, it was not only because they believed the result would be a foregone conclusion. Many Egyptians appeared unaware that the poll was actually taking place, while others professed ignorance of what amendments were being made, hardly surprising in a country where illiteracy rates are estimated at 60 per cent.

According to the official results the changes were approved by 75.9 per cent of those who voted. Justice Minister Mamdouh Marei announced that 27.1 per cent of Egypt's 36 million registered voters went to the polls.

The official figures were immediately questioned. Polling stations, pointed out many, were more or less deserted and Cairo's streets were uncharacteristically empty as many opted to stay indoors, fearing clashes between security forces and demonstrators.

"My children did not go to school and my husband and I preferred to stay home so as to avoid any conflict in the streets," said Noura Fouad, a civil servant.

And while security forces were indeed deployed in large numbers, so smooth was the flow of traffic that Rasha Tawfiq, who commutes from Heliopolis to downtown everyday, was prompted to hope that a referendum could be held every day.

The Egyptian Organisation of Human Rights (EOHR) estimates that voter turn out was no more than five per cent of the registered voters. The Hisham Mubarak Law Centre (HMLC) and the EOHR have accused the ruling National Democratic Party of rigging the yes vote. Representatives from both organisations were prevented from monitoring polling stations.

The EOHR reports anomalies in hundreds of polling stations. In the Nile Delta province of Damietta, for instance, civil servants were seen stuffing ballot boxes. "Flagrant rigging characterised the last hours of this referendum," the HMLC said in a statement.

Bahieddin Hassan, the director of the Cairo Institute of Human Rights Studies, says Egyptians cannot be blamed for boycotting the vote. "The process itself wasn't democratic. The amendments were pre-cooked and then adopted as proposed [by the government]."

Although phosphorous ink and transparent ballot boxes were used, supervision of the 334 main polling stations was restricted to judges, the majority of whom work for state-affiliated judicial bodies. The auxillary polling stations were monitored by civil servants. Judges' clubs boycotted the polls.

While government officials hailed the results, opposition forces said the referendum was a sham. Before the results were announced, Information Minister Anas El-Fiqi claimed voting was taking place with "complete transparency". He later announced that "the day passed safely" and characterised the poll as "a successful experience".

"Egyptians," he told reporters, "went to vote on a historic day. Attempts [to encourage a boycott] failed."

Opposition parties, however, claim their call for a boycott was reflected in the low turnout.

While pro-government national newspapers tended to have headline variants like on Tuesday's *Al-Ahram*'s "Turnout exceeded all expectations", which appeared above a photograph of President Mubarak casting his vote, opposition and independent newspapers featured photographs of deserted voting stations.

*Al-Ahram Weekly* toured voting stations in Cairo and Alexandria during the poll which began at 8am and ended 11 hours later.

At an Alexandrian polling station in the Al-Gommrok district only 100 out of 3,300 registered voters had turned up by 3pm. Here, and at other polling stations, those who did show up appeared to be government employees who were given a break from work to vote. Many claimed that they had received hints that a failure to vote would be penalised by salary deductions. Rumours also spread that those who failed to vote would face an LE100 fine. In other places, blankets and meat were distributed to voters after they had cast their ballot.

Representatives of the National Democratic Party stood in front of the polling stations trying to convince passers-by to vote yes to the amendments, using amplified sound systems to get their message across.

Despite the fact that the rules set by the Higher Elections Committee stipulate that any non-resident voter must present either a voting card or ID, many of the polling stations visited by the *Weekly* neglected to ask for the required documentation.

The attitude of 72-year-old Mohamed Ismail from Helwan was typical of many voters. "I really don't understand what these amendments mean but I came to vote yes," he said. "I live with my six daughters in a one-bedroom apartment and when they told me that these new amendments to the constitution would provide people like me with an income and cheap flats I decided to come and say yes."

Fifty-six -year-old Ragab Darwish had a different take. "The government knows what's best for us and as long as they say that these changes are good I am going to vote yes and take their word for it."

Mustafa Al-Manyalawi, a shop owner, agreed. "Although I don't really understand the changes they want to implement," he told the *Weekly*, "I am going to vote yes because I trust the government." Other voters said the amendments should have been debated more extensively before being put up for referendum.

Many, though, simply refused to take part in the poll. "If I vote I will lend this amended constitution legitimacy and authority," said Ahmed Abdel-Wakeel, a student. "I don't want to be a part of this dirty action."

"What's the use? All referendums are fixed," said 30-year-old Mohamed Afifi as he walked past Al-Tabari School polling station in Heliopolis. But it was 28-year-old engineer Emad Taha who perhaps summed up most succinctly the mood of the day. "What constitution?" he asked. "Who cares? Feed me first."

*Reported by Mohamed El-Sayed,*

Salonaz Sami, Reem Leila

*and Hadil Al-Shalchi*