

EGYPT: TOWARD A NEW CONSTITUTION?

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In a climate of tensions, Egypt opened polling stations on Tuesday to vote on a key referendum on a new constitution. The interior ministry deployed more than 200.000 policemen, 150 security units and 200 combat groups to secure the station from violence. Despite these measures, at least 11 people were reported killed in clashes between supporters of the army and those of the Muslim Brotherhood, while earlier in the morning a bomb exploded in front of a courthouse in Giza without causing any casualties. Egypt has witnessed a hike in domestic violence since former President Mohammad Morsi was ousted from power by the army in July 2013.

The referendum on the new constitution can be perceived from two perspectives. On the one hand, the new constitution contains some reformist clauses, such as gender equality and welfare. On the other hand, it has been seen as an attempt to reinforce the military power and alienate Islamist parties from Egypt's politics. In this regard, it is worth recalling that last December the military junta lead by General Al-Sisi declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization.

In more detail, the new constitution would allow the president to serve a four-year term which is renewable once; the president could be impeached by the parliament; it affirms the equality between men and women; it affirms the right to education, health-care and shelter; it forbids the creation of parties based on religion, race or geography; allows the military to appoint the defense ministry for the next eight years and allows military trials on civilians.

It is easy to understand how the constitutional draft has left the country split among supporters and opponents. The army's supporters see it as a progressive document that could pave the way to a real democracy in the future. Better education, gender equality and healthcare are some of the rights many Egyptians have been fighting for since the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak. In addition, the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood from the political life is perceived as a *conditio sine qua non* for political stability. This view is endorsed even by the ultraconservative Nour party, who sees the occasion as a chance to advance the Salafist agenda at detriment at the cost of the Brotherhood and of its political supporters in Qatar.

On the other hand, opposition movements have called for the boycott of the referendum. Opposition parties like Strong Egypt have denounced the intimidations suffered by those who wanted to vote "no," and rejects some of the clauses like the military trials for civilians and the strong limits to religious freedom. In this regard, opposition parties have blamed the constitutional committee of partiality, considering that out of the 50 members only 2 belonged to Islamist parties.

There are no doubts that the referendum will pass and the text of the new constitution will be approved. Nevertheless, although new elections could see General Al-Sisi as Egypt's next president, the country might be doomed to political instability for a long time. In fact, the complete marginalization of the Muslim Brotherhood has denied its followers from expressing some legitimate concerns in a legitimate context such as that of free and fair elections. Consequently, some of its more radical members could resort to terrorism to destabilize the military government by pushing it to declare emergency law, hence suspending the new constitution. This of course, would alienate those Egyptians who support the military as long as they are able to maintain security and guarantee those social rights they have been fighting for the last three years.

In all of this, we should not forget that Egypt is also the battle field of a geopolitical battle between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, who have in Cairo's (in)stability a particular interest to advance their political agenda.