

Egyptian election reveals depth of divisions

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Polling centre officials in Cairo sort ballots for counting during Egypt's presidential election last week. Photo: John Moore/Getty

Millions of Egyptians were happy to display the fingers that had been dipped in ink after they voted in the country's first ever open presidential elections last week. However, despite the pre-election hype, initial reports put the turnout at less than 50 per cent.

Some revolutionary organisations called for a boycott of the election, while Mohamed El-Baradei, a prominent liberal, said he did not vote. He spoke for many when he said the elections should not have taken place under military rule and in the absence of a new constitution.

However, tens of millions of Egyptians did vote, and early indications were that their verdict was indecisive, with significant variations based on geography, class, creed and attitude towards the role of religion in politics.

With official results not due until the end of the weekend, early reports say no candidate came close to winning 50 per cent of the vote, thus plunging the country into a divisive three-week campaign before the second round between the two leading candidates on June 16 and 17.

Yesterday, state media confirmed that the final round run-off would be between Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohammed Mursi and Ahmed Shafiq, a candidate from the Mubarak era.

The 'revolutionary candidates' showed well, despite not possessing the cash resources or organisation of some of the other campaigns. The liberal Islamist Abul-Fotouh and the particularly secular leftist Hamdeen Sabbahi polled strongly in many areas, especially Alexandria. However, their failure to unite - unity talks between the campaigns came to nothing - proved fatal to their chances of getting into the second round.

The pro-revolutionary Sabbahi was running a close third as votes across Egypt's 27 governorates were being counted this weekend.

Despair among young revolutionaries was already on display on Twitter when Shafiq's strong showing began to emerge soon after the polls closed. One activist tweeted: "Looking at TV coverage of the counting. The counter-revolution will be televised." Others compared it to Egypt's dark days after the crushing defeat by Israel in 1967.

The campaigns with the best resources and organisation have emerged on top. Mursi, the Muslim Brotherhood candidate, succeeded in mobilising the group's substantial support and topped the poll, although he was far short of a clear majority.

Shafiq, the candidate most associated with Hosni Mubarak's regime, won hundreds of thousands of votes from those who pine for the "old days" under Mubarak, Christians fearful of Islamist power, and people who think he will bring stability to a country which has experienced a sharp rise in crime since the revolution.

With considerable resources, and what many people suspect is the tacit support of Egypt's military rulers, Shafiq - the last prime minister to serve under Mubarak - is a highly divisive candidate. Unsurprisingly, a cousin of Hosni Mubarak told Egyptian media that the Mubarak clan voted solidly for Shafiq.

When Shafiq went to vote in Cairo, protesters shouted at him and threw shoes. If he was to be victorious, the reaction, particularly among the revolutionary movement, would be unpredictable - many would consider him illegitimate, and protests would be inevitable.

As counting began, Ahmad Sarhan, a spokesman for Shafiq, told reporters: "The revolution has ended. It is one-and-a-half years." Shafiq's supporters hope he will be a tough security man who will stabilise the country.

But ironically, he is the candidate most likely to unleash a wave of instability. Some activists have warned that if he wins, it could lead to a second revolution.

In a recent interview with this newspaper, the leading revolutionary Hossam el-Hamalawy predicted that a victory for Shafiq would be dangerous for the revolutionary movement. "Imagine if he got into the position of president. It would be like he would have a mandate to crack down on the revolution the following day," he said.

Now that Shafiq has grabbed second spot, it leaves Egyptians with what many would consider an unpalatable choice. Do they choose the candidate of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose victory would result in Islamists controlling the upper and lower houses of parliament, the constitutional assembly and the presidency, or do they vote for Shafiq, the candidate of the old regime whose victory will lead to questions about why there was a revolution in the first place?

But despite the despair of the revolutionary movement in the hours after the polls closed, the revolution has still seeped into the consciousness of millions here.

Many millions of Egyptians voted for candidates who supported the revolution and its goals.

Last Thursday, Egypt's defacto ruler, Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi, inspected a number of polling stations. At one military school, local official Amm Mohamed jumped from his chair to greet the military leader. Local journalists overheard him welcome Tantawi in a respectful manner.

"You are better than Hosni Mubarak, who did not shake hands with people," he said. "May God help you protect the whole country."

Tantawi then asked the man who he would vote for. "Let me keep my vote secret," Mohamed said. "Whisper it into my ear, then," Tantawi said, trying his luck again. "I cannot tell you who I will pick," Mohamed said with respectful defiance.

It is almost impossible, for many reasons, to imagine a similar vignette under Mubarak. Such a new-found spirit of defiance to authority spreads beyond the hard core of the revolutionary movement.

Despite fears of counter-revolution, the January 2011 revolution has changed Egypt significantly.

Whoever becomes president will face a citizenry which no longer trembles with fear at authority.