



# In Egypt, 'Vibrant' Political Culture Budding After Voters Approve Reforms

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An overwhelming majority of Egyptian voters approved a referendum on constitutional amendments that paves the way for presidential and parliamentary elections. Jeffrey Brown talks to Georgetown University's Samer Shehata about what's next for Egypt after Sunday's record turnout at the polls.

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### JIM LEHRER:

And to three takes on the revolutionary change and conflict in the Middle East, from North Africa to the Arabian Peninsula.

Jeffrey Brown starts with Egypt.

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### JEFFREY BROWN:

Millions of voters queued up for hours Saturday for a referendum held just five weeks after President Hosni Mubarak's resignation. The 41 percent turnout dwarfed that of any recent Egyptian election. For some, the very act of voting was an end in itself.

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### MAHMOUD PHILIP (through translator):

Saying yes or no is not the problem. What we should do is go out and vote.

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### JEFFREY BROWN:

At stake, a series of revisions to the constitution that would loosen eligibility requirements for presidential candidates, limit the president to two four-year terms, require appointment of a vice president, restrict the use of states of emergency — Mubarak had one in place the entire length of his rule — and pave the way for the new president to request redrafting of the entire constitution.

In the end, the yes-vote was overwhelming — 77 percent, more than 14 million Egyptians, approved the changes. Four million voted no, nearly 23 percent. The referendum was backed by the Muslim Brotherhood, which is well-organized and stands to gain from an accelerated timetable for elections.

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### MOHAMMED BADIE, Muslim Brotherhood (through translator):

Today, the Egyptians got their freedom back to determine their fate.

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### JEFFREY BROWN:

But some secular and liberal leaders of the uprising against Mubarak opposed the referendum, claiming the measures don't go far

enough.

Opponents included two likely presidential candidates, Arab League Secretary-General Amr Moussa and Nobel peace laureate Mohamed ElBaradei, whose Saturday visit to a polling station was cut short by a mob throwing bottles and rocks at him as he waded through a crowd.

And for more, we're joined once again by Samer Shehata, an assistant professor of Arab politics at Georgetown University, who recently returned from a visit to Egypt.

And welcome back.

SAMER SHEHATA, Georgetown University Center for Contemporary Arab Studies: Thank you.

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**JEFFREY BROWN:**

Clearly an historic moment, right, certainly any — unlike any election, recent election in Egypt.

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**SAMER SHEHATA:**

Well, that's right.

There haven't been free and fair national governmental elections in Egypt for 60-some years. So, regardless of what the outcome was, people's votes counted. And that's certainly significant.

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**JEFFREY BROWN:**

Now, the military remains in control of the government. And these amendments were proposed by a committee that the military put together. And it provoked some — some divisions, as we said.

Explain — explain the arguments for and against that came — that we had.

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**SAMER SHEHATA:**

Certainly.

The arguments against, which were led by a broad range of opposition parties and opposition groups, progressive political figures and so on, were that the constitutional amendments don't go far enough, that they limit themselves to the procedures of how the president is elected, as opposed to dealing with presidential powers.

One of the most difficult things about the last 30 or 40 years in Egypt has been that the president has had tremendous powers, sweeping powers to imprison people, to close newspapers, declare states of emergency at his will, to dissolve parliaments and so on. It was an imperial presidency.

So, one of the criticisms was that the — the constitutional amendments didn't go far enough, Egypt needs a new constitution, and also that by voting yes on this constitutional amendment package, parliamentary elections and presidential elections would occur too quickly, and that the new political movements and groups, the youth forces that led the revolution and some of the other political parties, wouldn't be prepared, wouldn't have enough time to organize for those elections, and the only groups that are organized on the ground right now, and that would then take advantage of early elections would be remnants of the old regime and the Muslim Brotherhood.

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**JEFFREY BROWN:**

And that explains the analysis, post-election analysis we've heard that this does leave the Brotherhood, for example, as one of the parties that can benefit most.

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**SAMER SHEHATA:**

Well, that's correct.

I think it would be a mistake, however, to think that, because the Brotherhood supported the constitutional amendments, that it was a 77 percent outcome. I don't think that's the case at all. But certainly, the Brotherhood pushed for a yes-vote on these amendments.

But they have also declared — and there's every indication to believe them — that they will only contest 35 percent of the seats in the upcoming parliamentary election. That's been their pattern in the past.

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**JEFFREY BROWN:**

And the military government, what is their stance now? They — they keep saying they want to hand back power as quickly as possible.

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**SAMER SHEHATA:**

I think that's true.

I think that, you know, being in charge of Egypt right now, of course, is a difficult, politically sensitive matter, and it opens them up to criticism. And they want a process in place and they want to hand over power, I think, to an elected government, a parliament, and a president relatively soon. They have said six months...

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**JEFFREY BROWN:**

Well, so what — yes, what does that mean? What happens next, right?

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**SAMER SHEHATA:**

Sure.

Well, they have said that there's — there is going to be a constitutional declaration later this week. But the previous announcements were that the next steps in this process are parliamentary elections in June, followed by presidential elections in August.

And, of course, the parliament that is selected, as your piece suggested, will then elect a 100-person body to draft a new constitution.

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**JEFFREY BROWN:**

So, in the coming weeks, the coming months, you expect to see, what, more political parties forming, reaching out to the people?

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**SAMER SHEHATA:**

Oh, I think it's going to be incredibly vibrant politically, new political parties forming, coalitions forming.

Of course, presidential candidates have already announced, individuals like Amr Moussa, Mohamed ElBaradei, and others, that they want to stand in elections — and then all kinds of movement having to do with specifics of new political parties law, calls for the end of the emergency law before these elections take place, things of that nature.

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**JEFFREY BROWN:**

All right, we will watch, of course.

Samer Shehata, thanks again.

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**SAMER SHEHATA:**

You're welcome.

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