

# Trade Union Elections: battling over a dead horse

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## **Labour, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Left and the State; the mix could be explosive, reports Fatemah Farag**

“The Muslim Brotherhood is contending these elections openly, and under their own banner, for the first time; economic and social pressures are squeezing the working class; contentious laws governing social insurance, health insurance and the working conditions of state employees are all expected to be pushed through parliament in its next session — and yes, the political weight of 3.5 million workers is one to consider very carefully,” sums up Khaled Ali, lawyer at the Hisham Mubarak Human Rights Centre and member of the Committee for Worker and Trade Union Freedom.

This might explain why the current elections in the country’s trade unions are such big news this time around.

The media attention is new. In recent years the affairs of the government-controlled General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) — the only legal trade union organisation in Egypt — has been of concern to a dwindling number of public sector and government workers, some left and labour activists and the odd journalist.

No longer. Trade union elections this year have been on the front pages of newspapers for four weeks now. The usually drab and desolate GFTU headquarters in downtown Cairo has been transformed into a hive of activity, with riot police cordons, political and labour activists taking to the streets, and free elections and due process being demanded in the courts and cyberspace.

The electoral procedures adopted by government have been contested by activists from day one. They stipulate that candidates must obtain a membership document from the GFTU. It is a condition labour activists have long denounced as undemocratic, arguing it is unreasonable to expect nominees to obtain papers from the very people they will be standing against.

Nominees seeking to obtain the documents must travel to Cairo and then queue in the federation’s headquarters.

“You really can’t take seriously an electoral procedure that makes workers travel from Aswan to Cairo to get a paper that says the same thing on the documents he is supposed to get from his union back home. It’s all a farce,” scoffs Ali.

Another bone of contention has been the tight time frame of the process. According to the Centre for Worker and Trade Union Services (CWTUS) which has set up a committee to document procedural violations, even if nominees succeed in getting their documents from the GFTU they are then required to travel back to their local union offices and register on the same day, a physical impossibility for those living far from Cairo.

Even after nominations are completed there are still obstacles to overcome. Almost no time has been allotted for campaigning, says Ahmed Seif, a lawyer and veteran human rights activist.

“Those with the most time will get two days and guess what: they fall on Friday and Saturday, both of which are holidays.”

And assuming you had a chance to campaign, what could you say?

Seif points out that Article 9 of the election guidelines issued by the Minister of Manpower and Immigration Eisha Abdel-Hady stipulates that no candidate for trade union office can refer to politics, political parties or religion while campaigning. Contravening the article automatically bars a candidate from standing.

By now Seif is laughing: “Really sometimes the lengths they go to are a bit much.”

The Ministry of Manpower and Immigration closed the door to nominations yesterday, after receiving more than 30,000 applications. Thirty-two committees at Labour Offices across the country, responsible for overseeing the electoral process, have been accepting petitions against nominations for two days, a procedure that ends today and the final announcement of the lists of candidates is to be announced on Monday. Elections for 11 general syndicates will then take place next Wednesday.

In the meantime labour activists have been busy taking their grievances to court. On Tuesday night Ali had just wound up a day at the State Court which reviewed 135 petitions against electoral procedures.

“These covered issues such as the lack of judicial monitoring of the elections, the inability of people to obtain their papers from the GFTU as well as contesting several of the minister’s decisions with regards to electoral process,” explained Ali.

Today the courts will continue to review documents which it is claimed show the state is attempting to manipulate the elections, and in the past week the courts have heard an estimated 400 petitions.

Gamal Eid, head of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, an on-line information centre used by some 140 local NGOs, suggests that “the state is attempting to bar leading labour activists from nominating themselves in these elections, cutting them at the source rather than resorting to electoral fraud against them later on in the process.”

The attention garnered by this year’s trade union elections is one more example of the increased political activity witnessed in the country since 2005, and the entry of the Muslim Brotherhood as a force to be reckoned with in this round has consolidated interest. While the Brotherhood has always had some presence in the trade unions, says Seif, this is the first time they have launched a concerted campaign, having previously focused their attention on professional (white-collar) syndicates. He attributes the group’s interest to the fact that workers have become completely disenchanted with the government-tied trade union bureaucracy, as well as to the growing popular appeal of religious rhetoric.

Eid believes the success of the Brotherhood in the parliamentary elections has “pushed them to the fore of political activity which is why, for the first time ever, they are contesting the trade union elections... under traditional Brotherhood slogans and banners.” They have been successful in linking up with some factions on the left which has boosted their position within the working class. “But Eid is keen to point out that in clamping down on the freedom of the electoral process the state is not just targeting the Muslim Brotherhood.” The state is also concerned with undermining those activists

that do not belong to a specific political trend but are a product of labour struggles. These represent class leadership that is against the state and it can only be expected that if they win they will lean either towards the left or the Islamists. "There is also the possibility, says Seif, that the union elections are being used as a rehearsal for upcoming municipal council elections. "I think they are testing the use of administrative procedures as a method of controlling the process without having to resort to the vote rigging on which they have traditionally depended. "Despite this year's media attention activists such as Kamal Abbas, head of CTUWS, argue that elections within the structure of the GFTU structure are the equivalent of beating a dead horse. The constituency of the government-controlled organisation — Egypt's only legal union — has always comprised public sector industrial workers, and they, Abbas points out, are increasingly rare. "The minister of investment has openly stated that except for four companies the little that remains of the industrial public sector is for sale. "Meanwhile, the bulk of "the new working class", in the private sector, is none unionised which means, says Abbas, that "the real battle is to fight for trade union pluralism, to build a new and independent trade union structure. " "The bulk of those who man the public sector now are middle-aged — they were too young to take up the early retirement schemes of the 1990s, and since the public sector no longer hires new recruits it is this middle-age strata that remains. Many of them were against the early retirement scheme and liquidation of the public sector on principle. This is a make it or break it juncture in their lives," says Eid.

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