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Egypt 'narrowly backs' charter in first round

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Voting has ended in the first round of the constitutional referendum in Egypt, with initial results indicating that supporters of the draft document have a narrow lead heading into the second round.

The early result of the poll is based on unofficial tallies that emerged on Sunday. Complete results are not due to be released until the second round on December 22.

The vote was largely peaceful, with long queues forming in Cairo and other cities and towns where this round of voting was held. The vote was staggered because many judges needed to oversee polling staged a boycott to voice their opposition.

Voting was extended for several hours, in order to allow those in queue to cast their ballots.

The Muslim Brotherhood said the group's tallies showed that 56.5 per cent of voters had supported the constitution, while 43 per cent had voted 'no'.

The Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) had representatives posted at almost every polling place in the 10 areas where the referendum was held on Saturday.

The opposition National Salvation Front coalition said in a statement that it would not recognise unofficial results, and would wait for a final tally after next week's second round.

"What it means is that its going to be quite difficult for the 'no' campaign, the opposition, to turn things around from here, and that's because Cairo and Alexandria have both cast their ballots already in this first day of voting, and it's the rural areas of Egypt that are mainly left to vote in the second round," reported Al Jazeera's Rory Challands in Cairo, adding that the latter areas tend to generally support the Muslim Brotherhood.

Late on Saturday, riot police fired tear gas to disperse dozens of hardline Morsi supporters who attacked the central Cairo headquarters of the opposition liberal Wafd Party with fireworks and stones.

Deadly clashes

Mohamed Morsi, the Egyptian president, and his supporters say the constitution is vital in order to move forward with the country's democratic transition. Opponents say that the basic law is too heavily influenced by religion, and that it tramples on minority rights.

The build-up to the vote was marked by deadly protests, with demonstrations held across the country by both opponents and supporters of the document.

The protests first started when Morsi accorded himself sweeping new powers and fast-tracked the constitution through an assembly dominated by allies from the FJP.

At least eight people were killed and several hundred injured in a series of clashes between the two camps.

On Friday, a day before the vote, rival factions armed with clubs, knives and swords fought in the streets of Alexandria. Opposition supporters trapped a Muslim preacher inside his mosque after he called for a 'yes' vote.

In order to pass, the constitution must be approved by more than 50 per cent of voters who cast ballots. A little more than half of Egypt's electorate of 51 million were eligible to vote in the first round.

Rights groups reported some abuses, such as polling stations opening late, officials telling people to vote 'yes', bribery and intimidation.

To ensure security during the referendum, 120,000 troops were deployed to reinforce 130,000 police.