

# Presidential election in Egypt: In pro-Sisi Mansoura, embittered youth avoid the polls

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The day before voting began in the presidential election, the road from Cairo to Mansoura was littered with signs for presidential candidate Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Almost every kiosk along the Nile boasted at least one close-lipped, smiling picture of the former defense minister in civilian garb.

The next morning in Mansoura, shops near a school-turned-polling station are similarly adorned. As voting gets underway, three polling stations are set up inside a barricaded square, and security forces search bags. The security presence was heavier than in previous years, according to several residents.

Inside the square, about 50 people mill around in the late morning heat on the first day of voting, some more enthusiastic than others.

A woman wearing the colors of the Egyptian flag approaches bystanders and announces that she is voting for Sisi. "Listen carefully. The entire country is voting for Sisi. This is a revolution," she declares. "It was not a coup, by God."

Sisi's popularity extends far beyond the capital, and many expect the results of the polls to be largely in his favor. This belief that the results are virtually preordained may be the cause of the noticeably low turnout, especially on Tuesday. The government gave the public sector the day off for the second day of voting, but it doesn't appear to have encouraged eligible voters to go to the polls.

A group of women with children walk past the voting queue and hold up pictures of the field marshal, one yelling, "Sisi, Sisi, Sisi! He's our love."

On the nearby Galaa Street, vendors sell Egyptian flags in the center divider and a line of about 100 people wait in line to vote, snaking around the wall of a school. Several cars drive by the polling stations blaring "Boshret Kheir" (Good Omen), a song encouraging Egyptians to get out and vote.

The Nile Delta city of Mansoura, located approximately 120 km northeast of Cairo, is the capital of the Daqahlia Governorate and home to half a million people.

It's also the site of one of the country's deadliest bombings in recent times, which many remember with horror. In December 2013, a massive explosion targeting the governorate's security directorate left 16 dead and more than 100 people wounded. Though the Sinai-based militant group Ansar Beit al-Maqdes claimed responsibility for the attack, the government blamed the Muslim Brotherhood and moved quickly to designate the group as a terrorist organization.

As the former chief of the Armed Forces, Sisi and his appeals to security and stability is by and far the most popular candidate in the city. But many of Mansoura's youth and students remain unconvinced that his is the best way forward.

Last Wednesday, the Mansoura Criminal Court sentenced 155 supporters of deposed President Mohamed Morsi to prison sentences ranging from two years to life, with 54 of the detainees

receiving life sentences. More than 20 students were among the defendants.

Mansoura University, originally a branch of Cairo University, has been the site of several clashes over the past year, as campuses across the country have witnessed deadly confrontations between protesting students and security forces.

Mohamed Osama, 20, who asked that his name be changed to protect his identity, participated in a silent protest against detained students three days ago. He was standing in front of Omar Effendi, a large retail store, when he was arrested along with three other students by plainclothes police. He was taken to an unmarked house and detained for two hours and beaten, he says.

Osama was formerly a member of the now-illegal April 6 Youth movement, but felt that the group's response wasn't strong enough to contest the forcible dispersals of Rabea el-Adaweya and Nahda Squares in August, which left at least 1,000 people dead. He left the group "the day after Rabae happened."

Osama is equally disillusioned with Sisi and his contender Hamdeen Sabbahi, and chose to boycott the election.

"The election? It's a play. They both just want power," he says dismissively, comparing the current political situation to Mubarak era. "I just want to leave the country," he adds.

Far from the polling stations, a café in an alley tucked off of Mashaya Street is filled with students studying diligently on the first day of the election.

The owner, Ashraf Wagdy, a 50-year-old psychologist, has made his bookstore a cultural center of sorts, a space friendly to political activists and artists alike. He was an avid protester in 2011 and 2012, and supports Sabbahi.

Wagdy says he's noticed a marked shift in the youth who frequent his bookstore. Instead of politics, many are investing their time and energy in music and art.

Wagdy claims that he was one of the youngest people at the polling station when he went to cast his vote for Sabbahi earlier in the day. The youth don't really have an impetus to vote, he says.

While no official figures are out, the polling stations seem to be dominated by elderly and female voters so far.

In Wagdy's view, one reason the youth sat this one out is their disillusionment with the dire economic situation.

"The youth today are caught between the Islamists and the military," he says, and react by rejecting both.

Ahmed Hassan, a 22-year-old engineering student at Mansoura University, fits this description. Like Osama, he decided not to vote.

"It's just a game and I don't want to participate," he says. "We know what's going to happen."

Hassan was also arrested recently, picked up by mistake outside of a protest that he says he wasn't even taking part in. The whole experience left him feeling unsafe and hopeless. Hassan says that he doesn't see any future for himself in Egypt.

Mohamed Zidan, 22, is another Mansoura University student. He was politically engaged and involved in the Kazaboon (Liars) campaign against military violations in 2011, but says that he has lost all interest in voting and doesn't see the point: "It doesn't matter at all."

As for his friends, they were divided into two groups: one group was boycotting, and the other was voting for Sisi. Only one friend was voting for Sabbahi.

One 27-year-old female student, who asked to remain anonymous, says that all of her friends tried to convince her to vote for Sisi.

"They tried to convince me based on the concept of security, stability, terrorism. But I'm not convinced that either of the candidates are right," she says. She went to the polls and drew a line through both candidates' names, making a statement by invalidating her vote.

Back at Wagdy's bookshop, an informal poll reveals that the patrons are evenly split: half are planning to boycott, and half are planning to vote or had voted already. One remains undecided.

"The youth don't see that there is a political solution," Wagdy says. "They see that the political door is closed for them. But what else is there? We don't know."

**Alexia Underwood**

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<http://www.madamasr.com/content/pro-sisi-mansoura-embittered-youth-avoid-polls>

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