

Egypt reels from 'judicial coup'

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's transition to democracy was thrown into further disarray yesterday after its top court ordered parliament dissolved and allowed a disputed candidate to remain in a divisive presidential runoff.

Activists and political figures have described the rulings as the final phase of a military coup that takes the transition back to square one.

"Back to where you were," read a huge red headline in the independent daily Al-Shorouk.

"A bomb: Shafiq remains and the parliament is void," screamed the liberal Wafd daily.

The Supreme Constitutional Court on Thursday ruled certain articles in the law governing parliamentary elections to be invalid, thus annulling the Islamist-led house.

It also ruled as unconstitutional the political isolation law which bars senior members of ousted president Hosni Mubarak's regime and top members of his now-dissolved party from running for public office for 10 years.

The legislation had threatened to disqualify Ahmed Shafiq, Mubarak's last prime minister, who is to face the Muslim Brotherhood's



An Egyptian protester raises his slippers at military police protesting a court ruling which paved the way for the military to resume legislative powers.

Mohammed Mursi in a presidential election runoff today and tomorrow.

Egyptian parties and activists accused the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces of staging a "counter-revolution" after a series of measures that consolidated its power ahead of the polls.

The court rulings came a day after a decision by the justice ministry to grant army personnel the right to arrest civilians after that power was lifted when the decades-old state of

"This is in many ways a soft military coup. Now we have the parliamentary power going back to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, they will have their presidential candidate, they have the arrest laws. So we are going back to square one," said Ibrahim al-Houdaiby, an expert on Egyptian politics.

On the international front, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called for a full transfer of power to elected civilians. "There can be no going back on the democratic transition called for by the Egyptian people," she told reporters in Washington.

Parliament speaker Saad al-Kattni, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood whose political arm won 47 percent of seats in the house, said there were "question marks over the timing of the ruling."

A military source said the court's ruling technically meant that the military would assume legislative powers.

Whoever wins, the next president, whose powers are yet to be defined by a new constitution, will inherit a struggling economy, deteriorating security and the challenge of uniting a nation divided by the uprising and its sometimes deadly aftermath.

Syrian peace hope fading

Russia rejects post-Assad talks with West

REUTERS, Moscow/beitrut

Both rebels and forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad are intensifying violence in Syria and striving for military gains rather than peaceful transition, the chief UN monitor in Syria said yesterday.

Major-General Robert Mood's comments came as Russia further dug its feet in against Western pressure to topple Assad, insisting it would not discuss a post-Assad Syria.

"Violence over the past 10 days has been intensified, again willingly by both parties, with losses on both sides and at significant risk to our observers," Mood said in Damascus.

"There appears to be a lack of willingness to see a peaceful transition. Instead there is a push towards advancing military positions."

In Moscow, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said discussions regarding a political transformation in Syria after Assad "are not being held and cannot be held, because to decide for the Syrian people contradicts our position completely".

"We do not get involved in overthrowing regimes - neither through approval of unilateral actions by the U.N. Security Council nor by participation in any political plots," he said.

His comments were a response to a remark by US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland suggesting Washington and Moscow were discussing a post-Assad strategy in Syria.

Violence has surged in recent weeks after government forces and allied militia launched offensives to regain territories controlled by the opposition and rebels abandoned a ceasefire negotiated by international envoy Kofi Annan.

On the ground, at least 15 people were killed in violence on Friday. More than 80 people were killed on Thursday.

Britain's UN envoy Lyall Grant said on Thursday "it is time for the Security Council to take much tougher action to enforce the Kofi Annan plan," echoing comments on Tuesday by French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, who suggested the possibility of a no-fly zone.

Meanwhile, Human Rights Watch accused Assad's forces of using rape and other sexual violence against men, women and children during the uprising, citing interviews with victims.

"Sexual violence in detention is one of many horrific weapons in the Syrian government's torture arsenal and Syrian security forces regularly use it to humiliate and degrade detainees with complete impunity," said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at HRW.

"The assaults are not limited to detention facilities - government forces and pro-government shabiha militia members have also sexually assaulted women and girls during home raids and residential sweeps."

China to send its first woman into space today

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday said a female astronaut will be among the three-person team on board the Shenzhou-9 spacecraft when it launches on Saturday ahead of the country's first manned space docking.

Liu Yang, a 33-year-old major in the People's Liberation Army, will be on board the Shenzhou-9 when it takes off for China's fourth manned space launch, a spokesman for the country's manned space programme said.

"From day one I have been told I am no different from the male astronauts," Liu, a trained fighter pilot who is married but has no children, told the state broadcaster CCTV in an interview broadcast after Friday's announcement.

"I believe in persevering. If you persevere, success lies ahead of you," added Liu, interviewed wearing her blue astronaut's uniform.

Liu and her two male colleagues, Jing Haipeng and Liu Wang, will take off at 6.37pm from the Jiuquan space base in north China's Gobi desert.

They will perform China's first manned space docking -- a highly technical procedure that brings together two vessels in high speed orbit.

The mission to dock with the Tiangong-1 module currently orbiting Earth is the latest step in a plan aimed at giving the country a permanent space station by 2020.

China sent its first person into space in 2003 and has since conducted several manned missions, the latest in 2008, but has never yet included a woman.



Liu Yang

INDIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Pranab, finally, made UPA candidate

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee, under fire for his recent handling of the slowing economy, is to step down after being named on Friday as



Sonia Gandhi

the ruling coalition's candidate for president.

The United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, led by Mukherjee's Congress Party, announced that the minister would be its nominee for the largely ceremonial post of Indian head of state which falls vacant in July.

"There is broad support for his candidature," Congress supremo Sonia Gandhi said in a statement at a meeting of UPA leaders at the residence of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

"The UPA appeals to all political parties and all members of parliament and members of state legislative assemblies to support the candidature of Pranab Mukherjee," Gandhi said in her statement.

The nomination means Mukherjee, 77, will resign as finance minister, with television reports suggesting he might step down on June 24. The election will be held July 19.

U-turning from his earlier stand, Samajwadi Party's chief Mulayam Singh Yadav



Pranab Mukherjee

yesterday extended his support to Pranab.

"Pranab is experienced, honest, intelligent and a capable person. We support him," said the veteran leader who with Mamata Banerjee on

Wednesday rejected Pranab's candidacy. Shortly after Congress-led UPA announced Pranab Mukherjee as its presidential candidate, an unfazed Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee yesterday said her party remained firm on the candidature of Dr APJ Abdul Kalam.

Meanwhile, according to Times Now sources, Kalam has said that he was not keen in running for the presidency now.

With UPA nominating Pranab Mukherjee as its presidential candidate, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reached out to various political parties including the main opposition BJP to seek support.

Singh called Leaders of Opposition in the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha, Shushma Swaraj and Arun Jaitley, sources said.

SP and BSP have expressed their support for 77-year-old Mukherjee in the Presidential election.

Yemen army seizes another Qaeda bastion

AFP, Sanaa

Yemeni troops yesterday took control of the city of Shuqra after al-Qaeda militants pulled out, the third jihadist bastion in the south to fall in the space of a week, a military official said.

He said advancing troops killed 27 militants in gun battles overnight, after state media reported at least 48 people, including 40 militants, were killed during the day on Thursday.

A local official told AFP al-Qaeda fighters "pulled out towards Azzan," in Shabwa province, some 110 kilometres to the northeast.

Shuqra was the last major al-Qaeda stronghold in Abyan province to fall to government forces.

Taking advantage of the weakening of central government control by an Arab Spring-inspired uprising last year, the militants had overrun most of Abyan, seizing Zinjibar, Jaar, Shuqra and several villages.

NEWS IN brief

Gambian made ICC chief prosecutor

AFP, The Hague

Gambian lawyer Fatou Bensouda was sworn in yesterday as the International Criminal Court's new chief prosecutor, pledging she was ready to lead the fight against the world's worst war criminals.

The 51-year-old Bensouda is the first woman and the first African to head the team of prosecutors at the tribunal, which is currently investigating 15 cases in

Tibetan self-immolates in China

AFP, Beijing

A Tibetan man died after setting himself alight in a remote area of northwestern China yesterday in protest against Chinese rule, rights groups said, the latest such incident to hit the country.

The middle-aged man self-immolated in front of a Chinese military compound in Qinghai province's Huangnan Tibetan autonomous prefecture, the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy said.

Since March last year, at least 38 people have set themselves on fire in Tibetan-inhabited areas of China in protest at repressive government policies, accord-



FALKLANDS ROW UK, Argentina joust at UN

AFP, United Nations

President Cristina Kirchner pressed Argentina's claim to the Falkland Islands yesterday at the United Nations as Buenos Aires and Britain traded barbs on the 30th anniversary of their war over the disputed territory.

Kirchner's demand that London at least open talks came at the end of a day of rival commemorations to mark the end of Britain's military operation to end a 74-day Argentine occupation of the South Atlantic islands.

In London, Britain's Prime Minister David Cameron vowed to defend the Falklands against new "aggression" and said there could be no sovereignty negotiations.

Veterans of the 1982 war conflict also gathered in the Falklands capital Port Stanley to remember the 255 British soldiers killed. More than 650 Argentines also died in the conflict for the islands known as the Malvinas in Spanish.

"We are not asking anyone to say yes, the Malvinas belong to Argentina. We are asking no more, no less than to sit down and talk," she told the UN decolonization committee, a relatively low-level body overwhelmed by the presence of the president and more than 90 of her ministers and officials.

Kirchner also held talks with UN leader Ban Ki-moon who "reiterated that his good offices to resolve this dispute remain available if the parties are willing to engage," said UN spokesman Martin Nesirky.



MYANMAR UNREST

Suu Kyi walks on tight ropes

AFP, Bangkok

Sectarian unrest rocking Myanmar has put Aung San Suu Kyi under pressure to speak up for the stateless Rohingya, but experts say the issue is a political minefield given ethnic and religious divides.

The Myanmar democracy icon, who is on her first trip to Europe after years under house arrest, received a rapturous standing ovation at the Swiss parliament yesterday.

The Nobel laureate was repeatedly asked by reporters Thursday about the clashes between Buddhist Rakhine and the Muslim Rohingya that have left dozens dead and more than 30,000 displaced.

Speaking in Geneva the veteran activist stressed "the need for rule of law", adding that without it "such communal strife will only continue".

But her carefully chosen comments fell short of offering strong support to Myanmar's estimated 800,000 Rohingya, described by the United Nations as one of the world's most persecuted minorities, and she is on the horns of a dilemma.

Myanmar's government considers the Rohingya to be foreigners, while many citizens -- including the local Rakhine Buddhist population -- see them as illegal immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh and view them with hostility.

"Our appeal is to the UN, foreign nations, the Myanmar government and especially to Suu Kyi," Mohammad Islam, leader of

Rohingya refugees living in a camp in the Bangladesh border town of Teknaf, told AFP on Wednesday.

"Aung San Suu Kyi hasn't done or said anything for us, yet the Rohingya including my parents campaigned for her in the 1990 elections."

Experts say the issue is fraught with political danger for Suu Kyi as she tries to build her credentials as a unity figure who can represent Myanmar's myriad minority groups as well as the democratic opposition among the majority Burmese.

"Many will want to know whether she considers Rohingya to be Burmese citizens deserving of the rights and protections that status should entail," said Nicholas Farrelly, a fellow at Australian National University.

If she fails to tackle the subject she risks disappointing those who "crave her leadership" he said.

"It's a very explosive situation and whoever touches the issue will have to walk a very, very fine line," said Aung Naing Oo, a Myanmar. "She (Suu Kyi) may stay on the wider issues of human rights without directly tackling the political issue," he added.

The lack of significant support from Suu Kyi and other prominent pro-democracy activists in Myanmar has left Rohingyas living in refugee camps in neighbouring Bangladesh in despair.

"Like most other Rohingya people, she is silent about the rights of Rohingya," Islam said.

Pakistan boasted of nuke strike on India

GUARDIAN ONLINE

Pakistan could launch a nuclear strike on India within eight seconds, claimed an army general in Islamabad whose warning is described in the latest volume of Alastair Campbell's diaries.

The general asked Tony Blair's former communications director to remind India of Pakistan's nuclear capability amid fears in Islamabad that Delhi was "determined to take them out".

Britain became so concerned about Pakistan's threat that Blair's senior foreign policy adviser, Sir David Manning, later warned in a paper that Pakistan was prepared to "go nuclear".

The warnings are relayed by Campbell in a section in his latest diaries, The Burden of Power, which are being serialised in the Guardian on Saturday and Monday. The diaries start on the day of the 9/11 attacks and end with Campbell's decision to stand down in August 2003 after the Iraq war.

Campbell writes: "At dinner I was between two five-star generals who spent most of the time listing atrocities for which they held the Indians responsible...When the time came to leave, the livelier of the two generals asked me to remind the Indians: 'It takes us eight seconds to get the missiles over', then flashed a huge toothy grin.