

Split widens in divided Egypt

Opposition ups ante, urges 'no' vote; military postpones unity talks

AFP, Cairo

A controversial referendum on a new constitution in Egypt due to start Saturday looks set to further split the country after the opposition called for a 'no' vote and imposed conditions that could yet result in its boycott.

Egypt's powerful army called off a national "unity" meeting between President Mohamed Morsi and opposition leaders that was scheduled yesterday because responses from both sides "were not at the level wished for."

The dialogue has been pushed back to an unspecified "later date," according to a statement on the military's official Facebook page.

The opposition National Salvation Front yesterday finally responded by urging its supporters to vote 'no' -- but also warning it could call a last-minute boycott if Morsi's government failed to meet tough conditions.

It demanded, though, that the referendum take place on a single day, and that judges and independent foreign monitors watch over it.

Those conditions appeared nearly impossible for Morsi to meet, and made Saturday's vote unpredictable.

Morsi has brushed aside all opposition

CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM



PHOTO: AFP

An Egyptian woman votes on a draft constitution at the Egyptian embassy in Jordan yesterday.

demands to halt the referendum on the constitution, which was drafted by a panel dominated by his Islamist allies and rushed through under near-absolute powers he gave up only last weekend after big protests.

But many judges are refusing to oversee the vote, forcing Morsi to order the plebiscite to be split over two days, on Saturday and a week later, on December 22, to meet voting rules.

Saturday will see voters in 10 governorates called to polling stations, including in the two

biggest cities of Cairo and Alexandria. On December 22 it will be the turn of Giza, Port Said, Luxor and 14 other regions.

Egyptians abroad started early voting yesterday in embassies abroad, the official MENA news agency reported.

The president has ordered the army to secure state institutions, giving them police powers up to the results of the referendum.

Three weeks of protests -- including violent clashes between Morsi's supporters and opponents last week that killed eight people and wounded hundreds -- have failed to sway Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood from holding the referendum.

Michael Wahid Hanna, a political analyst at US think-tank The Century Foundation, told AFP that, given the Muslim Brotherhood's proven ability to mobilise grassroots support, the odds were good that the referendum would pass, although it was not "an absolute certainty."

This may potentially aggravate the crisis.

The military has already said it fears the Arab world's most populous country is headed for a disastrous "dark tunnel" unless the two sides talk.

Key Indian state goes to polls today

PTI, Ahmedabad

Almost half of Gujarat would exercise their franchise tomorrow for 87 seats in the first phase of the 182-member Gujarat Assembly elections where 1.81 crore voters will decide the fate of 846 candidates.

For this phase, BJP has fielded candidates on all 87 seats going to the poll, whereas Congress is contesting on 84 and Gujarat Parivartan Party on 83.

Apart from these three major parties, there are total 26 political parties and 383 independents in the fray, which include BJP rebel and sitting MLA Kanubhai Kalsaria, who has formed a new forum - Sadbhavna Manch - and fielded six candidates.

NEWS IN brief

Mandela making progress

AFP, Johannesburg

Nelson Mandela is making progress and doctors are happy with his response to treatment for a lung infection, the South African government said yesterday.

"Doctors attending to former president Mandela have reported that he has made progress during the past 24 hours and they are satisfied with the way he is responding to treatment," it said in a statement.

Chavez cancer surgery successful

AFP, Caracas

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, an ailing icon of the Latin American left, was recovering after a successful cancer operation in Cuba, his vice president and chosen successor said Tuesday.

A visibly moved Nicolas Maduro, to whom Chavez delegated power before undergoing a fourth round of cancer surgery in Havana, said Chavez would shortly begin a "post-operative phase" that would last several days.

India frees Pakistani after 20 years

AFP, New Delhi

India's top court yesterday quashed the murder conviction of an 82-year-old Pakistani who spent 20 years in jail, allowing him to return home in a move likely to help diplomatic ties.

Khalil Chisti, a microbiologist, was arrested and charged with murder in 1992 after a brawl in the western Indian city of Ajmer which he was visiting for a family wedding. He was convicted in 2010 by a local court and given a life sentence.

India tests nuke-capable missile

IANS, Bhubaneswar

India yesterday carried out a successful test of its nuclear-capable surface-to-surface Agni-I missile from a military base in Odisha, an official said.

The intermediate-range ballistic missile, which can strike a target 700 km away, was tested from a facility on Wheeler Island near Dhamra in Bhadrak district, 170 km from here.

Singapore speaker resigns in sex row

AFP, Singapore

Singapore's parliamentary Speaker yesterday announced his resignation after confessing he had an extramarital affair with a community worker, setting off a fresh sex scandal in the city-state.

Michael Palmer, 44, a married father of one who was only sworn in as Speaker in October 2011, also quit his seat in parliament and membership of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP).

Papal blessings on Twetter

REUTERS, Vatican City

After weeks of anticipation, Pope Benedict sent his first tweet yesterday. "Dear friends, I am pleased to get in touch with you through Twitter. Thank you for your generous response. I bless all of you from my heart."

Since the pope last week announced that he would start tweeting under his official Latin title @pontifex, more than 683,000 people have registered to follow his main account in English.

Blasts hit Syrian interior ministry 7 killed, 50 injured

AFP, Damascus

Explosions outside the Syrian interior ministry, including a car bomb, killed seven people and wounded 50 others yesterday, a security official said.

Interior Minister Mohammad al-Shaar and other top ranking officials escaped unharmed, state television reported.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said 25 people were killed and wounded.

The adjacent building housing the Egyptian embassy was also hit, Egypt's official MENA news agency reported.

Meanwhile, more than 125 civilians from President Bashar al-Assad's minority sect were reported killed Tuesday.

"Between 125 and 150 people were killed or hurt by gunshots and explosions in the village of Aqrab," The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights told AFP.

Several bombings have struck Damascus since an uprising against President Bashar al-Assad's rule erupted in March last year, among them suicide attacks.

Pak leaders' tax evasion records unmasked

AFP, Islamabad

More than 60 percent of Pakistan's cabinet and two thirds of its federal lawmakers paid no tax last year, according to a report released yesterday on tax evasion among the country's political leaders.

The study entitled "Representation without Taxation" by investigative journalist Umar Cheema takes Pakistan's elected leaders to task for paying little or no tax despite an estimated average net wealth of \$882,000.

"The problem starts at the top. Those who make revenue policies, run the government and collect taxes, have not been able to set good examples for others," said the report, likely to increase pressure on Pakistan to implement tax reform.

According to the findings, President



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani journalist Umar Cheema with his report.

Asif Ali Zardari did not file a tax return in 2011 and neither did 34 of the 55 cabinet members including Interior Minister Rehman Malik.

Of the 20 cabinet ministers who did pay, most made only negligible contributions, including Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf, with 142,536 rupees (\$1,466) and Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar with 69,619 rupees (\$716).

Among all the lawmakers in the upper and lower houses of the federal parliament, 67 percent failed to file tax returns in 2011; 28 percent did and five percent were not possible to verify, according to the report.

It also found that 78 members of parliament are still not registered with a national taxation number.

Israeli forces kill Palestinian in West Bank

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli border guards yesterday shot dead a Palestinian teenager armed with a pistol in the West Bank city of Hebron, sparking stone-throwing attacks on troops in the area, police and witnesses said.

A Palestinian brandished a pistol as he approached a post of border guards, who opened fire and killed him," a police spokeswoman said.

Palestinian sources named the gunman as Mohammed Ziad Salaima, aged 16, and witnesses said that Palestinians began throwing stones at Israeli troops in the area following his death.



A man watches a TV screen broadcasting news on North Korea's rocket launch in Seoul yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

N Korea fires rocket defying world

AFP, Seoul

North Korea launched a long-range rocket yesterday, days before its young ruler marks 12 months in power, intensifying the threat posed by the nuclear-armed state and provoking global condemnation.

Pyongyang put the timing of the launch at 9:49am and said the satellite was deployed in orbit nearly 10 minutes later.

The United States and its allies were infuriated and even China expressed "regret" at the successful launch by its wayward communist ally -- while also calling on all sides to avoid "stoking the flames".

Russia labelled Pyongyang's defiance of UN resolutions "unacceptable" and warned the launch would have a "negative effect" on regional stability, while the European Union threatened new sanctions.

The launch triggered plans for an emergency session of the UN Security Council, which has imposed round after round of sanctions against North Korea over its ballistic missile and nuclear programmes, to little avail.

North Korea insisted the mission was not a banned inter-continental missile test but was designed to place a scientific satellite in orbit, and said it had achieved all its objectives.

"The satellite has entered the orbit as planned," Pyongyang's Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said in a statement repeated later in a triumphant special broadcast on state television.

The US military said the launch appeared to have successfully put an object in orbit.

Masao Okonogi, a professor of Korean politics at Keio University in Japan, said the launch would thrust North Korea close to the top of Washington's national security agenda as President Barack Obama prepares for a second term.

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