

# Egypt: Legitimacy crisis for US ally

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As the regime of President Hosni Mubarak regime in Egypt faces a growing crisis of legitimacy, expressed by protests, boycotts and industrial strikes, the government has pushed through a referendum to amend the constitution and enshrine the country’s police-state laws. On March 25, Amnesty International said the amendments will cause “the greatest erosion of rights in 26 years” in Egypt.

In 2004-05, the US government pushed its one of its key Middle East allies to embark on “democratic reforms”, but has since relieved this pressure. Washington has described the regime’s assault on democracy as “disappointing”.

The ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), which claimed that the amendments would reduce the threat of terrorism and “sectarian tension” and “strengthen democracy”, used its numbers in the lower house of parliament (the People’s Assembly) to rapidly approve the proposed amendments on March 19. *Al Ahram Weekly* reported in its March 22-28 edition that opposition MPs met outside the building “holding up black banners that read ‘No to the Constitutional Coup’”.

Mubarak then declared through presidential decree that the amendments would be taken to a public referendum on March 26. Judges and opposition groups responded by saying they would boycott the referendum, as there was no time for a public discussion on their implications or to build a campaign for a “no” vote.

The 34 proposed amendments were “approved” in the March 26 referendum. The regime announced that 27% of Egypt’s 36 million registered voters turned out to vote, and put the official results as being 75.9% in favour of the amendments. Numerous independent monitoring groups reported widespread vote-rigging and ballot-stuffing, and put the voter turnout at 3-4% at most. Associated Press reported on March 27 that a security official staffing a Cairo polling booth said he saw “Interior Ministry officials order ruling party [NDP] workers to fill the ballot boxes with as many as 500 votes each”.

A March 26 Aljazeera article quoted the network’s correspondent Mike Hanna as explaining that the government “has made absolutely clear that it will regard a majority ‘yes’ vote as an endorsement of its constitutional amendments, regardless of how many people actually vote”.

## Outlawing opposition

The constitutional amendments have three key aims: the first is to enshrine in the constitution the anti-democratic measures introduced in Egypt since a “state of emergency” was declared following

the assassination of President Anwar al Sadat in 1981, after which Mubarak, who was vice-president at the time, came to power.

The second is to remove any constitutional avenues that the popular outlawed opposition group the Muslim Brotherhood — which won 88 (or one-fifth) of the seats in 2005's parliamentary elections running as independents — may have had to appeal its illegal status by amending the constitution to ban any religious groups from participating in the political process. The third key aim of the changes is to limit the judicial supervision of future elections and to pave the way for a succession of power from Mubarak to his son, Gamal Mubarak.

The security laws, which the NDP claimed are aimed at “lifting” the state of emergency, will actually give permanent constitutional legitimacy to these draconian measures. The amendment to Article 179 reads “the state will assume responsibility for safeguarding security and public order in the face of the dangers of terrorism”. AAW reported in its March 22-28 edition that the amendments to this article will mean that “suspects can be arrested, investigated and monitored without judicial supervision, approval or warrants”.

The AAW article states that legal experts believe this means that “anyone can be subject to arrest at anytime”, that suspects can be held without being charged for two months, and that suspects may be referred to a military rather than civilian court, without any constitutional rights to appeal this process.

### **‘Secularising’ Egypt?**

Behind the “war on terror” rhetoric of the regime is anxiety at the growing dissatisfaction among the Egyptian population and a determination to crush all opposition forces that could potentially turn this sentiment into a strong political movement for reform. The Muslim Brotherhood, though officially illegal, is the most popular opposition force in the country and a major target of the constitutional changes.

The NDP claims that the constitutional ban on religious parties is necessary to separate religion from politics in Egypt, however the regime itself often relies on religion to try to foster support for its policies. There were no amendments proposed to the second article of the constitution, which enshrines Islamic sharia law as the underlying premise of the country's legal system. A major slogan of the NDP in its attempt to mobilise support for the March 26 referendum was “your vote is a duty before God”.

Ibrahim El-Houdaibi argued in an article on the Brotherhood's English-language website Ikhwanweb.com that the amendments to Article 5, which ban political activity based on religion, are “extremely dangerous” because they give “the state absolute monopoly over the interpretation and the use of religion in the public sphere, defining what is Sharia and what is not, whether or not it should be applied, and how ... In a sense, this creates a new form of theocracy.”

### **Torture and repression**

The regime is becoming increasingly reliant on its notorious riot police, intimidation, attacks on the press, and imprisonment and torture to quell dissent. An April 11 Amnesty report stated: “Thousands of Egyptians have been locked up in the name of security; some have been held without charge or trial for years, often despite court orders for their release, while others have been sentenced after grossly unfair trials.”

Washington gives the Mubarak regime US\$2 billion a year in “aid”, in return for it loyally backing the US agenda in the region. Egypt is also a popular destination for the US to fly its “enemy combatant” prisoners to be tortured, free from legal safeguards. Australian Mamdouh Habib, who was sent by the US to be detained in Egypt for five months, says he was “hung by his arms from hooks, repeatedly shocked, nearly drowned and brutally beaten” (Washington Post, January 6, 2005) by the Egyptian authorities before being sent to Guantanamo Bay.

Despite a concerted campaign of repression against the Brotherhood, the organisation is strengthening its support base. It announced on April 14 that it will defy the constitutional changes and attempt to field up to 30 candidates in the May 10 Shura Council (upper house) elections. Most other opposition groups are planning to boycott the elections, as they have in the past.

The Brussels-based International Crisis Group released a report on January 30 noting that a radicalisation is taking place among the Bedouin tribes of the Sinai, citing political and economic neglect and marginalisation as being key factors leading to a rise in support for religious fundamentalist ideas and organisations, including terrorist groups. The February 26 Christian Science Monitor noted that state repression against the Bedouin — thousands have been arrested and many tortured since 2004 — has only fuelled this radicalisation. Political Islam is increasingly being viewed by a section of the marginalised in Egypt — in the Sinai but also in the urban centres — as a means of resisting the brutality and corruption of the regime.

There has also been a significant rise in workers’ struggles in Egypt, with 27,000 striking textile workers sparking an industrial strike wave in December that spread throughout a number of industries and areas. Attacks on wages and basic conditions prompted this militant outbreak of labour struggle, almost always in opposition to the workers’ official union representatives, with workers saying they have nothing left to lose by fighting back.

There were more than 200 strikes and sit-ins in 2006, and the government appears to fear an open confrontation with workers. AAW noted in its April 12-18 edition that “Since December, in almost every confrontation between workers and the state, the government has backed down and accepted the workers’ demands”.

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