

Egyptian military delays election as opposition mounts

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Egypt's ruling military council issued a new election law by decree Wednesday, overriding objections from the youth groups that spearheaded the mass movement against the dictatorship of President Hosni Mubarak and retaining many of the antidemocratic provisions under which the old regime regularly rigged elections.

Most significantly, the decree postpones the general election scheduled for late September, although a military spokesman claimed that voting for two houses of parliament would be completed in three stages by the end of this year.

The election of a new president to replace Mubarak would be put off until next year, effectively leaving the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces in control, with the military's top officer, Field Marshal Mohammed Hussein Tantawi, a longtime Mubarak crony, as de facto head of state.

There are a number of flagrantly antidemocratic electoral provisions. More than one-fourth of the upper house will be appointed by the next president rather than elected. Half the seats in the lower house will be reserved for independent candidates, rather than those running on party lists, ensuring the influence of wealthy individuals, many of them connected to the military, with the means to carry out vote-buying on a large scale.

That provision also opens the door for former officials of the Mubarak regime to return to power as "independents," despite the dissolution of the ruling National Democratic Party, the political machine through which the Egyptian military ruled for many decades.

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces issued a draft version of the electoral law in June for public comment, but the system as outlined July 20 by Major General Mamdouh Shaheen, a member of SCAF, largely ignores the objections of the numerous political parties that have been formed in the wake of the ouster of Mubarak.

The SCAF has rejected calls for international monitoring of the elections, Shaheen said, calling that an issue of national sovereignty. He said that a Higher Electoral Commission would meet on September 18 to begin the practical preparations for the elections, with members of the judiciary, not the military or the Interior ministry, assuming that responsibility. The election would be held no sooner than 30 days after that, the general said, and could be pushed back still further.

In a concession to the youth who played such an important role in the 18-day revolt against Mubarak, the age of eligibility for

candidates to the new parliament was reduced from 30 years to 25 years.

The military rebuffed demands by the liberal bourgeois parties like Al-Ghad and Al-Wafd for an end to the electoral quotas that require 50 percent of all seats to be filled by workers and farmers. Established in 1964 under the nationalist regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the quotas allowed Nasser and his successors Sadat and Mubarak to pay lip service to socialism, while they packed the legislature with military cronies and well-connected businessmen.

Al-Ghad leader Ayman Nour, a favorite of the United States, declared that "the 50 per cent quota for workers and farmers reflect the socialist ideology of the autocratic Nasserite age in Egypt in the 1960s" and argued "now it is high time to get rid of it altogether."

Nasserite parties called for retention of the quota. Rifaat El-Said, a leader of the Tagammu Party, said, "it is true that many deputies in previous parliaments were not truly representing workers and farmers, but this is not a sufficient cause to eliminate this quota altogether."

During the period of public discussion of the election law, General Shaheen had suggested that the military would be guaranteed a special position in the state, modeled on that enjoyed by the military in Turkey, including a provision that established its independence of the future president. This idea was apparently abandoned in the face of widespread popular opposition.

The electoral law was issued amid mounting popular opposition to the military council, which is the direct continuation of the Mubarak regime in both policy and personnel.

Today marks the beginning of a third week of occupation of Tahrir Square by thousands of demonstrators, most of them young, demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Essam Sharaf and the arrest of those responsible for the mass repression during the revolt against Mubarak.

No one has been punished for the killing of at least 846 demonstrators in January and February, with only a single policeman tried in absentia. In an effort last week to appease the campaign demanding trial and punishment of the police murderers, Sharaf's government ordered the early retirement or firing of nearly 700 police commanders.

The strike wave by Egyptian workers continues. Thousands of workers at Cairo International Airport, including air traffic controllers and other navigation personnel, staged a protest against Sharaf's nomination of former air force general Lotfi Kamal as

minister of civil aviation.

The workers blocked the main highway to the airport, calling for an end to the policy of installing retired military officers in executive positions, as well as demanding wage parity with workers at EgyptAir, the country's national airline.

In Alexandria, Egypt's second-largest city, there was a mutiny by soldiers at the main security base in Dekheila, after reports that an officer had beaten a rank-and-file soldier to death. The soldiers blocked access to the base and burned several vehicles. The protest was only disbanded after it was learned that the victim had suffered an epileptic fit and fainted, but was not dead.

In an indication of the mounting political unrest, at least three different coalitions have called for mass protests in the capital city this coming week, along diametrically opposed political trajectories.

The Revolution Youth Coalition, together with popular coalitions in Alexandria, Suez and other cities, said the sit-in at Tahrir Square would be expanded into a mass march on Saturday, July 23, the 59th anniversary of the military overthrow of King Farouk, the last Egyptian monarch. The date is a national holiday, celebrated as Revolution Day.

A statement backing this protest, signed by 25 political parties and groups, demanded the resignation of prosecutors in Cairo, Alexandria and Suez and the immediate trial and punishment of policemen involved in the killings in January and February.

The Muslim Brotherhood, which is playing an increasingly open right-wing role, issued an official call Wednesday for a "million man march" in Tahrir Square next Friday, July 29, to demonstrate opposition to efforts to incorporate secularism into the new Egyptian constitution.

The Justice and Freedom Party, established by members of the Muslim Brotherhood, is reportedly not endorsing the march, but it received the backing of the "Popular Will Front," an alliance of Islamist and Salafist groups seeking to establish sharia law in Egypt.

Nasserite parties have also called for protests on July 29 in Tahrir Square, declaring the occasion "Social Justice Friday," setting up the possibility of a clash between rival groups of demonstrators in the center of Cairo.

The ruling SCAF will undoubtedly seek to take advantage of such clashes to assert its role as the country's political arbiter. Since the Tahrir Square sit-in resumed on July 8, the military council has issued statements warning against any attempt to "seize" power and threatening to break up protests by force if there was any disruption of government functioning.

In keeping with the pattern of the past five months, the military regime has sought to combine threats of repression with limited concessions to the growing popular opposition to its rule.

Prime Minister Sharaf announced July 18 a reshuffling of the cabinet, sacking more than half the ministers, including those in charge of foreign affairs, finance, communications, education, antiquities, trade and industry, as well as the deputy prime minister.

Foreign Minister Mohamed al-Orabi was in office less than a month, and was replaced by Mohamed Kamel Amr, a former ambassador to Saudi Arabia under Mubarak, as well as

representing Egypt to the World Bank. Ali al-Selmi, a leader of the liberal Wafd party, was brought into the cabinet as a deputy prime minister in charge of social reform. Al-Selmi announced the halting of what he called the "unfair privatization program," discontinuing plans to sell off the remaining 147 companies owned by the Egyptian state.

According to *Al-Ahram Online*, the new cabinet was warmly welcomed by Egyptian business interests, particularly after the new finance minister, Hazem al-Beblawy, reiterated the regime's commitment to liberalizing the economy and disavowed any effort at state intervention to alleviate the economic plight of Egyptians multimillioned poor.

The two ministers with the closest connections to the military—Minister of Interior Mansur Essawy and Minister of Justice Abdel Aziz al-Gindi—were retained, although their shielding of the police from investigation and punishment sparked the current Tahrir Square protest.

The new cabinet was sworn in before Field Marshal Tantawi July 21. The general declared their top priority was "restoring security," preparing the election and "rebuilding confidence" in the Egyptian economy—i.e., among foreign and domestic capitalists.

The maneuvers of the Egyptian junta are being conducted in close coordination with Washington, long the main financial backer of Mubarak and the Egyptian military. The Obama administration recently pledged \$2 billion in economic aid, and it is disbursing more than \$40 million a month to Egyptian political organizations through such agencies as the National Endowment for Democracy—a huge sum for such an impoverished country.

Military-to-military ties continue at a high level. On July 1, the US Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) notified Congress of a planned sale of 125 M1A1 tank kits worth more than \$1.3 billion. The Egyptian military already deploys more than 3,700 tanks, the bulk of them US-built, although it has not fought a war since 1973. The main function of the gargantuan military establishment is to suppress the working people of Egypt and guarantee the interests of the imperialist powers, the state of Israel and the Egyptian ruling elite.



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