

Egypt stages referendum to institutionalize General Sisi's dictatorship

By Bill Van Auken
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Egypt's military-dominated dictatorship is rushing ahead with a referendum this weekend on constitutional amendments that would effectively make Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi dictator for life, while institutionalizing the bloody repression his regime has carried out against all forms of political opposition and particularly the Egyptian working class.

The plan for the three-day referendum beginning Saturday was announced on Wednesday, just one day after the country's parliament, stacked with Sisi supporters, approved the proposed amendments to the Egyptian constitution by an overwhelming margin of 554 to 22, with one abstention. The vote was staged as a patriotic event, with legislators waving small Egyptian flags and national hymns being played in the background.

The referendum is being staged under conditions in which there has been no time for the Egyptian population to even consider the sweeping amendments to the constitution, which not only extend the presidential term to six years, but also establish a "transitional" period, allowing Sisi to override a two-term limit and run for a third term, remaining in office until at least 2030. They also provide him with complete control over the judiciary, while expanding the already overwhelming role of the military in the country's political affairs.

One of the amendments establishes the military's responsibility for "safeguarding the Constitution and democracy, preserving the basic foundations of the State and its civil nature, the gains of the people and the rights and freedoms of individuals."

The constitutional "reform" institutionalizes the already widespread practice of trying civilians in military courts. Some 15,000 people, including 150 children, have faced such drumhead trials since the 2013 coup that overthrew the country's elected president, Mohammed Morsi, and brought Sisi to power, according to the estimates of human rights organizations.

Sisi consolidated his rule with the massacre of over 1,000 people by Egyptian security forces at Cairo's Rabaa Square

in 2013. Since then, over 60,000 people have been thrown into the regime's jails for political reasons, facing rampant torture. Since the beginning of 2019, the regime has executed 15 political prisoners who were sentenced to death on the sole basis of confessions extracted under torture.

In truly Orwellian style, the regime plastered the streets of Cairo with propaganda posters

and hung giant banners in Tahrir Square, the iconic setting of the mass demonstrations in 2011 that led to the downfall of the 30-year, US-backed dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak, all calling for Egyptians to "do the right thing" and vote "yes" in a referendum whose contents had not even been made known.

Amnesty International issued a statement denouncing the constitutional amendments as designed to "strengthen impunity for human rights violations by members of the security forces," while Human Rights Watch stated that they were written to "institutionalize authoritarianism."

Speaking at a press conference called by human rights groups in Paris, Amr Waked, among Egypt's best known actors, who is banned in his own country, said, "These amendments would take us back to a dictatorship fit for the Middle Ages."

The actor denounced the major Western powers which support the Sisi government, particularly with massive arms deals.

"Why are you giving the dictatorship legitimacy? Why are you selling arms to it?" he demanded. "Have you turned into arms dealers?" He warned that those who are backing Sisi today will one day pay a price "higher than their investments in keeping him in power".

Washington stands first and foremost among those supporting the blood-stained dictatorship, with the US Congress approving the Trump administration's request for \$3 billion in aid to the Sisi regime, with another \$1.4 billion in the pipeline for 2020.

Trump welcomed Sisi to the White House last week, praising him for doing "a fantastic job in a very difficult situation" and declaring "We agree on so many things," no

doubt among them, the support for draconian methods of repression against domestic opposition, with the US president clearly wishing he could use the same measures in the US as Sisi does in Egypt.

Earlier this year, France's President Emmanuel Macron, facing rising social protest at home, flew to Cairo to sign approximately 30 deals with the Sisi regime, with whom Paris has declared a "strategic partnership."

Germany has likewise established close ties with the Sisi regime, while Sisi hosted heads of state who flew in from across Europe to embrace the Egyptian tyrant at a first-ever summit of the European Union (EU) and the League of Arab States (LAS) held in Sharm el-Sheikh in February.

The support of the US and European powers for Sisi is not merely a matter of mercenary considerations of the major arms corporations. They have embraced him precisely because of his leading role in suppressing the revolutionary movement of workers and young people that toppled Mubarak in 2011, which threatened to spread throughout the region and inspired millions across the globe.

The Egyptian regime has blocked more than 34,000 websites in an attempt to shut down an internet opposition campaign being waged under the title *Batel*, or "Void", seeking to express rejection of the amendments and the government's rigged referendum. Nearly 300,000 people have registered their support for the campaign, despite the government crackdown, which has disrupted a large number of websites belonging to businesses, religious organizations and others unconnected to the opposition effort.

The referendum will have no more legitimacy than the two elections Sisi has staged for the presidency. He won the last one by 97 percent after disqualifying and locking up any credible opponents.

There is, however, no one in the West suggesting that his rule is "illegitimate", in contrast to the bellicose demands for the overthrow of Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro over elections staged in 2018 that were a paragon of democracy by comparison to the sham votes in Egypt.

In addition to violently suppressing the resistance of the Egyptian working class, Sisi plays an increasingly central role in counterrevolutionary conspiracies throughout the region. On Monday, he staged a meeting with the former Libyan general and longtime CIA asset Khalifa Haftar, even as his "Libyan National Army" escalated its siege of Tripoli, where over 200 have been killed, 600 wounded, and more than 13,000 civilians have been displaced by the fighting.

Sisi issued a statement praising Haftar's "efforts to combat terrorism and extremist groups and militias in order to achieve security and stability ..." According to news reports, the Egyptian regime also offered Haftar sophisticated military equipment, including night-vision

goggles and anti-aircraft jamming devices to aid in his attack on the Libyan capital.

Meanwhile, high-level Egyptian delegations have gone to Khartoum to assist the Sudanese military in strangling the mass popular rebellion that has forced out the country's ruler, Omar al-Bashir last Thursday.

The millions of workers and young people who have been on the streets of Algeria since February, forcing the resignation of president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, are calling attention to the bloody Egyptian events as the Algerian army headed by Gen. Ahmed Gaed Salah claims that it will oversee a "transition" and unleashes escalating repression against the protests.

The approval of Sisi's dictatorship by Wall Street and Western finance capital found expression Wednesday with the rating agency Moody's raising Egypt's rating to B2 with a "stable" outlook, with assurances that "profitability will remain strong" in the subjugated country.

Under conditions in which 40 percent of the population lives in desperate poverty, subsisting on less than \$2 a day and with even these meager incomes being eroded by an inflation rate that has risen to 15 percent, such stability, along with Sisi's dreams of becoming president for life, may soon prove short-lived. The powerful movement of the working class in areas like the textile mill towns of the Nile Delta and Egypt's ports that brought down Mubarak will inevitably erupt once again. The critical question is assimilating the lessons of the betrayal of the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 and building a new revolutionary leadership in the working class as a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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