

Egypt referendum on El-Sisi term extension to start Saturday

Wed, 2019-04-17 16:44

CAIRO: Egypt on Wednesday set a referendum for April 20-22 on sweeping constitutional changes including amendments that could extend President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's rule until 2030.

"The referendum process ... will take place inside Egypt... from April 20-22," Lashin Ibrahim, head of the National Election Authority said at a press conference.

The announcement came after Egypt's parliament on Tuesday overwhelmingly passed the changes, despite complaints from critics that they are "unconstitutional" and designed to "consolidate authoritarianism".

The amendments extend presidential terms from four to six years, but maintain a limit of two terms.

Under the changes, El-Sisi's current term will be prolonged to 2024 from 2022 and he would then be allowed to run for another six-year term.

The constitutional changes also include giving the military greater influence in political life, granting El-Sisi wide control over the judiciary and broadening the jurisdiction of military courts over civilians.

As a military chief, El-Sisi led the army's overthrow of Mohamed Morsi in 2013 following mass protests against the Islamist leader's rule.

He won his first term as president in 2014 and was re-elected in March 2018 with more than 97 percent of the vote, after standing virtually unopposed. His government has been widely criticised by human rights groups for the repression of political opponents.



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Egypt parliament votes to extend El-Sisi rule
Egypt parliament to vote this week to extend El-Sisi's rule

[Turkey's opposition takes office in Istanbul, appeal still pending](#)

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Wed, 2019-04-17 12:06

ISTANBUL/ANKARA: Turkey's main opposition candidate was declared Istanbul's mayor on Wednesday after election recounts were finally completed, despite an appeal still pending by President Tayyip Erdogan's AK Party to re-run the vote in the country's largest city.

The final result of the March 31 local elections showed a narrow victory for the secularist opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) in Turkey's

commercial hub, ending 25 years of control by the AK Party (AKP) and its Islamist predecessors.

The loss is especially hard for Erdogan, who launched his political career in Istanbul as mayor in the 1990s and has triumphed in more than a dozen elections since his Islamist-rooted AKP came to power in 2002.

The Turkish lira, which has dipped since the election, firmed on Wednesday. As he formally took office after a campaign which featured months of harsh rhetoric from Erdogan's AK Party and more than two weeks of challenges and recounts, Ekrem Imamoglu promised to work for all 16 million residents of the city.

"We never gave up, we never gave up on our battle for democracy and rights," he told supporters at Istanbul's municipality building. "We are aware of our responsibilities and the needs of this city. We will start to serve immediately."

Imamoglu's margin of victory – the final count put him some 13,000 votes, or less than 0.2 percentage points, ahead of the AK Party candidate and former prime minister Binali Yildirim – prompted several AKP challenges.

On Tuesday, after 16 days of appeals and recounts, the AKP asked the High Election Board (YSK) to annul and re-run the election in Istanbul over what it said were irregularities. Its nationalist MHP allies made a similar request on Wednesday.

"We are aware there are ongoing processes... We hope the relevant authorities will complete these processes in the most sensitive and just way," Imamoglu said.

"TOO MANY IRREGULARITIES"

The repeated challenges by the AKP and MHP have fuelled frustration among opposition supporters which spilled over into football stadiums at the weekend when fans chanted at top Istanbul derby matches for the mayoral mandate to be given to their candidate.

"There are way too many irregularities," AKP Deputy Chairman Ali Ihsan Yavuz said, presenting the party's justification for its demand for a new vote. "We are saying that organised fraud, unlawfulness and crimes were committed."

CHP Deputy Chairman Muharrem Erkek responded that there were "no concrete documents, information or evidence in the AKP appeal for an annulment."

"There is no legitimate reason at all. You are using your right (to appeal) to damage the will of Istanbul," he said.

While the AKP was defeated in the battle for Istanbul mayor, results showed the party had won most seats in its municipal councils. The AKP's re-run appeal applies only to the mayoral elections, not those for municipal councils.

Wolfango Piccoli, co-president of Teneo political risk advisers, said it was puzzling to call only for a re-run of the mayoral elections, and added that some of the areas where the AKP claimed fraud took place were under its responsibility.

Uncertainty over the election results has also put pressure on financial markets, pushing the lira down nearly 5 percent.

"From the market perspective, an extended period of uncertainty around elections is a bad idea – it would suggest more election-related policy easing which is bad for the rebalancing story," Tim Ash, senior emerging markets strategist at BlueBay Asset Management, told Reuters.

Erdogan had vowed that Turkey would enter a four and half year period with no elections after March 31, during which the ailing economy would be the focus. If the AKP appeal is upheld, Istanbul, which makes up more than a third of Turkey's economy, will head to polls again on June 2.



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Pro-Kurdish party slams Turkey ban on elected mayors taking office
Turkey's ruling AK Party to seek new Istanbul election

[Turkey's Erdogan meets Iran minister over Syria](#)

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Wed, 2019-04-17 11:58

ISTANBUL: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Wednesday met with Iran's

foreign minister, who arrived in Ankara to brief him on his meeting with Syria's President Bashar Assad.

Turkey supports Syrian opposition rebels and Iran backs Assad in Syria's long war, but the two sides have been expanding contacts amid international efforts to end the fighting.

Kazakhstan will host a fresh round of Syria talks on April 25-26 in its capital, recently renamed from Astana to Nur-Sultan.

"I had a long interview with Bashar Assad. I will be giving details of these discussions to Mr. Erdogan," Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif told reporters in translated comments.

Ankara broke ties with Damascus in 2011 after the start of the Syrian war, and Erdogan has in the past described Assad as an "assassin."

But Erdogan acknowledged in February that low-level contacts have been taking place and his rhetoric has also softened in tone in recent months.

"In Syria, from the start, on the ground, we do not agree with Iran on many issues," Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said on Wednesday. "But we have decided to cooperate with Iran for a political solution."

Repeated rounds of UN-backed Syria peace talks have failed to end the bloodshed, and Iran, Russia and Turkey have sponsored the parallel so-called Astana negotiations since early 2017.

Talks among the three countries have focused on the militant-held bastion of Idlib in northwestern Syria, local Syrian media have reported.

That region bordering Turkey, is mostly held by Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, and is in theory protected from a massive Syrian regime offensive by a Russia-Turkey deal.

The September accord aimed to set up a buffer zone around Idlib, but was never fully implemented as militants refused to withdraw.



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Turkey, Qatar criticize US designation of IRGC as terror group
Turkish defense minister had 'constructive' US talks: Anadolu

[Israel's president formally nominates Netanyahu as PM](#)

Author:

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Wed, 2019-04-17 10:29

JERUSALEM: Israel's president on Wednesday formally nominated Benjamin Netanyahu for a fourth consecutive term as prime minister, officially launching a process that is expected to result in a new government dominated by religious and nationalist parties in the coming weeks.

In one of the president's few non-ceremonial roles, President Reuven Rivlin tasked Netanyahu with assembling a governing coalition within 42 days.

The move was widely expected after Netanyahu's Likud party and its right-wing allies captured a majority of seats in parliamentary elections last week.

In a joint appearance after the two leaders signed and presented the official nomination, Rivlin called on Netanyahu to "heal the wounds and rifts" laid bare in Israeli society by the bruising election campaign.

Netanyahu said he was "moved" to accept his fifth nomination as prime minister "as though it's the first time, and in a certain way, even more than the first time."

He said he would "do everything to earn the trust that the citizens of Israel have bestowed on me."

In a post-election ritual, Rivlin hosted consultations with party leaders this week to hear their recommendations for who should serve as the next prime minister.

Netanyahu's nationalist and religious allies all lobbied for Netanyahu to continue as prime minister. The last one to hold out, former Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman of the hawkish Yisrael Beitenu party, formally confirmed his support for Netanyahu late Monday.

Netanyahu's right-wing bloc – made up of Kulanu, the Union of Right Wing Parties, Yisrael Beitenu and the ultra-Orthodox Shas and United Torah Judaism – now commands a 65-55 majority in the 120-seat parliament.

In the coming weeks, Netanyahu will have to negotiate coalition deals with

his partners, who will jockey for powerful Cabinet posts with large and influential budgets.

If Netanyahu fails to form a coalition within 42 days, Benny Gantz, leader of the rival centrist Blue and White party, would be given a shot at assembling a government.

But that doesn't appear to be in the cards. "We will establish a right-wing government as soon as possible, likely within a month," said Yonatan Ulrich, a spokesman for the prime minister.

In a matter of months, Netanyahu will officially become Israel's longest-serving prime minister, surpassing David Ben-Gurion, the country's founding father.



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[Benjamin Netanyahu](#)

Benjamin Netanyahu passes threshold for nomination as Israel's premierIsraeli president begins consultations before tapping new prime minister

[Turkish defense minister had](#)

'constructive' US talks: Anadolu

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Wed, 2019-04-17 08:08

ISTANBUL: Turkey's defense minister said he had a "very constructive" talks with US Acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan and their views have got closer on some subjects, state-owned Anadolu news agency reported on Wednesday.

Defense Minister Hulusi Akar had been visiting Washington with a large Turkish delegation for talks which have in part focused on areas of discord between the NATO allies, chiefly the purchase of a missile-defense system and the war in Syria.

"The talk was very constructive and occurred with a very positive approach," Akar said of his meeting with Shanahan, according to Anadolu. "We gladly observed that they understood many subjects much better and have got very close to our views on these subjects."

He did not specify which subjects he was referring to.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said last week Washington had told Ankara it could face retribution for buying Russian S-400 missile defense systems under a sanctions law known as Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CATSAA).

President Tayyip Erdogan's spokesman Ibrahim Kalin said on Tuesday Turkey expects President Donald Trump to use a waiver to protect it if the US Congress decides to sanction Ankara over the planned S-400 purchase.

Turkey has not backed down from the acquisition and said it should not trigger sanctions as Ankara is not an adversary of Washington and remains committed to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

US officials have said the S-400 purchase would risk Ankara's partnership in the joint strike fighter F-35 program because it would compromise the jets, made by Lockheed Martin Corp. Turkish companies produce some of the parts for the F-35 stealth fighter jet.

Akar said Turkey had fulfilled its responsibilities on the issue of the F-35 project and that the training of Turkish pilots and maintenance teams was continuing.

"We expect the other eight countries who are partners in this project to fulfil their responsibilities toward us," he said.

Ankara has proposed to Washington that the two countries establish a technical committee under the NATO umbrella to determine whether the S-400s endanger the F-35 jets as the Americans argue, and is waiting to hear back from the United States.

The United States and other NATO allies that own F-35s fear the S-400 radar will learn how to spot and track the jet, making it less able to evade Russian weapons.

The disagreement is the latest in a series of diplomatic disputes between the NATO allies, including Turkish demands that Washington extradite cleric Fethullah Gulen, differences over Middle East policy and the war in Syria,

and sanctions on Iran.



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