

Banners and posters flood Egypt's streets ahead of referendum

Author:

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CAIRO: Banners and posters have been put up across major Egyptian cities, ahead of a proposed referendum on significant amendments to the country's constitution.

The changes, approved by the Egyptian parliament in February, would see presidential terms extended from four to six years, as well as alterations to the number of terms presidents can serve.

If passed, the proposals would allow the incumbent President Abdul Fattah El-Sisi, to remain in office until 2034.

Posters and signs have been erected in Cairo's Tahrir Square, scene of several symbolic political protests and upheavals in recent years, and the surrounding areas of the capital. They have also been spotted in Mokattam, Giza, Al-Falaki and elsewhere.

Most bear the insignia of the Nation's Future Party (NFP), the pro-military faction who support the amendments. Many feature slogans including "Do the right thing" and "Share your opinion, say yes to a better future."

Senior official Imad Saif told Arab News that the party was keen to find as many ways as possible to raise awareness of the impending changes among the general public, stressing that it had organized seminars and conferences to explain them and their importance for the country.

His colleague Ahmed Dokak added that participation in the forthcoming referendum would be a demonstration of the public's support for the direction the country was moving in, and a de facto endorsement of El-Sisi himself.

The date of the referendum has yet to be announced, and the final draft of the amendments has also not been confirmed.

A government source told Arab News they expected it to be "between April 21-23," but that this would be subject to Parliament agreeing on the wording of the draft.

Critics have raised concerns, however, over the amount of power the referendum will hand the president if it goes in his favor.

There have also been questions raised as to the source of financing for the banner and poster campaign, with a lack of clarity as to whether funds have been raised through individual donors, or from the coffers of the NFP.



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[Algerians abroad return home, seeing hope in protest movement](#)

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Sun, 2019-04-07 02:52

ALGIERS: For weeks, expat Algerians have been streaming home, some just for the weekend, to play their part in the historic changes sweeping the country. "I took unpaid leave to come and march in Algeria, to be here physically,"

said Chahrazade Kaci, who arrived back from London just days before president Abdelaziz Bouteflika resigned in the face of huge protests.

"It's a duty," said Kaci, 52, who has spent almost half her life in the British capital since going into exile at the height of Algeria's 1990s civil war.

Sports shoes on her feet and an Algerian flag draped over her shoulders, she held aloft a sign in English: "Call to all Algerians living abroad – return home and support our citizens in their struggle to build the 2nd republic."

Kaci was one of many returnees among the immense crowd that filled the streets of Algiers on Friday, the first mass demonstration since Bouteflika announced on Tuesday he was stepping down after two decades in power.

Flying in from Europe, the Gulf and North America, some have used up annual leave or taken extra time off work to take part.

"Since February 22, I haven't been able to sleep," Kaci said, referring to the day of the first mass protests against Bouteflika's bid for a fifth term in office.

"I'm addicted to the Internet, I follow developments 24 hours a day and I don't miss anything on social media," Kaci said.

She was joined in the crowd by her former husband Salah Allali, who had flown in from Qatar, while her daughter Nada, who was born in Britain, and nephew Yazid Nait-Ladjemil had both come from London to take part in the protest.

Kaci herself arrived back in Algiers the previous Friday and "joined the march right from the airport," she said.

Following Bouteflika's resignation, protesters are now pressing on with calls for sweeping reforms and the departure of key figures in the 82-year-old's entourage.

Bouteflika's departure was "just the beginning," Kaci said. "Still to come is the departure of the rest of the 'gang' and the building of a second republic."

Protesters say they want to see the resignations of the powerful "3B" – Senate speaker Abdelkader Bensalah, head of the constitutional council Tayeb Belaiz and Prime Minister Nouredine Bedoui.

Born in Algiers, Kaci studied marine biology, but like many Algerians, left the country when it plunged in the early 1990s into a decade-long civil war that left at least 200,000 people dead.

Back in Algiers, returned expats say they are surprised by the country's new-found freedom of speech and the strong presence of women at the vast, largely peaceful marches.

Kheira, 65, also took unpaid leave from her job as a teacher in Montreal to take part in "these historic marches."

She had moved to Canada in 2000, to be reunited with her children after sending them there at the height of the civil war.

"My children have everything there, but they are ready to come work and invest in their country," she said.

Former trade unionist Salah Allali, who also sought refuge in Britain in the 1990s, took an extra week of holiday without pay to be able to head home.

"The regime must understand that this revolution must end with its departure," he said.

Yazid Nait-Ladjemil, who has lived in London for the past two years, took part in several demonstrations organized by Algerians in the British capital, but also returned home to play a role in the protests on the ground.

He said he would not rule out a return to his country. "It's a rebirth – before, (Algeria) was a bit depressing," he said. The demonstrations "give me a sense of hope."



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Algeria's tidy revolutionaries: Cleanup after mass protests
Algerian intelligence chief sacked, protests continue

[Arab world comes to Ivy League](#)

Sat, 2019-04-06 23:03

CAMBRIDGE, Massachusetts: The venue could not have been more "Ivy League" America, but the topics under discussion, and the thought leaders discussing them, could not have been more Arab.

The Arab Conference at Harvard, the largest Arab conference in North America, hosted by one of the most prestigious academic institutions in the world, began on Friday.

"This conference is actually very timely," Amin Awad, director of the Middle East and North Africa bureau at the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), told Arab News.



Amin Awad. (Supplied)

"It's very important, and I think we should have more of this, because it illustrates that solutions can be found in discussion around issues of concern to youth today in the Arab world in regards to political, military and security elements ... the whole massive movement of people, the phenomenon of these radicalized groups, which is really at the heart of the youth's future."

As the three-day "(Re)Imagining Home" conference began, Awad took part in a

discussion on Arab refugees with Middle East analyst Ibrahim Al-Assil, Director General of the Institute for Palestine Studies Salma El-Yassir, and the communication and youth development specialist at Education Above All, Hani Shehada.

INNUMBERS

17

Average years of displacement.

40%

Percentage of globally displaced who are in the Middle East and North Africa.

68.5m

Total number of people displaced worldwide.

6%

Percentage of global population who are displaced.

6

People per day who die crossing the Mediterranean.

“Millions of refugees are found in the Middle East in terms of internal displacement, 40 percent of the total number of 70 million displaced globally,” Awad said.

“Those who left home as internally displaced refugees, from Syria let’s say, in 2011 when they were babies, today they are 8 (years old) and don’t have any sense of belonging to any area,” he added.

“Those who left at 8, today they’re 16. You can imagine moving from 8 to 16 with no education. Or if they left at 12 they’re 20 today. A lot of them lost a big part of their childhood, very important and formative years.”

Shaden Khallaf, a senior policy adviser at the UNHCR, chillingly summarized the refugee situation in terms of debate and discussion: “When it comes to talking about the movement of people, we’ve never been as polarized as we are today.”



Shaden Khalaf. (Supplied)

A discussion on social media and influence, held before a packed room of students, considered how platforms such as Twitter and Instagram had replaced traditional media and allowed individuals to present themselves and their stories to the world.

Speakers Hadia Ghaleb, Karen Wazen, Ahmed Shihab-Eldin and Amy Mowafi urged the audience to “tell your stories.” Shihab-Eldin told students, who crowded around him afterwards: “Change is happening.”

Social media is allowing the Arab story, such as in Palestine and Syria, to come to Americans, who “are hearing more and more from us,” he said. “We’re changing people’s perceptions over time.”

Ghaleb, a marketing expert from Dubai and CEO of Ghaleb Production House, said social media had attracted many Arabs and was changing the traditional methods of marketing, presenting Arab culture in a different, more impactful way.



Amy Mowafi

Mowafi, a communications activist from Egypt and CEO of the M04 Network, said: “Social media is our greatest weapon to tell our story and change our narrative.”

Leading speakers at the event include American University of Beirut President Fadlo Khuri, and property tycoons Mohamad Hadid and Mohamed Morshedy.

Other panelists include Emirati Middle East art expert Sultan Sooud Al-Qassebi, Mashrou’ Leila frontman Hamed Sinno, BuildPalestine CEO Besan Abu-Joudeh and UN Commissioner Alaa Murabit.

Adel El-Adawy, a professor at the American University in Cairo, told Arab News: “It’s very interesting times in our region, so to see different people from the Arab community who are living abroad coming together – experts from various fields such as governance, health care and so on – to give their input on what’s going in the region, is fascinating.”

There will be discussions on refugees and human rights, influence and governance, and health care.



Dina Masri (Supplied)

“The theme ‘(Re)Imagining Home’ speaks to every Arab,” the conference co-chair, Dina Masri, told Arab News. “It speaks to the Arab in their homeland trying to imagine a better future, the Arab-American who is working through questions of identity in their new home, and pushes both the Arabs in their homeland and the diaspora to discuss what home means to the millions of displaced Arab refugees in the region,” she said. “The conference is intended to empower Arabs in their homeland to continue to work toward a better future, as well as foster a sense of responsibility to the region in those who are part of the diaspora,” she added.

“We hope that through this conference, our attendees will meet others who are understanding of their identity struggles, and who will push them to do better for our part of the world.”



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Algeria's tidy revolutionaries: Cleanup after mass protests

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Sat, 2019-04-06 02:54

ALGIERS, Algeria: Here's one way Algeria's protest movement is unlike any other: After massive pro-democracy demonstrations every week, the protesters themselves roam the streets picking up bottles, papers and other detritus left behind.

It's a powerful symbol of the movement's peaceful, hopeful spirit.

And it's no small task after events like the latest protest on Friday, when the boulevards of Algiers thronged with so many people that it took hours to traverse a few blocks.

After the protests started Feb. 22 against President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and his entourage, organizers started sending messages on Facebook calling for demonstrators to stay peaceful and clean up after themselves.

Now the cleanup operation is a fundamental part of the Friday protest ritual, including individual volunteers pitching in around the city, along with more organized crews wearing orange vests.

"We're volunteers. We organized ourselves after appeals on social networks. The shop owners give us free garbage bags. We have formed several groups," said Abdellah Debaili, 36, a cleanup worker from the working class Algiers neighborhood of Hussein Dey Est.

He stands on a boulevard leading to the central post office, the most iconic gathering point of the movement, cajoling passersby to discard their orange peels, coffee cups or newspapers in the black plastic bag at his side. Each time they do, he smiles and says, "shukran," or thank you.

"We're happy," he told The Associated Press, "because people congratulate us for doing this work."

The peaceful nature of the protests is especially important to Algerians after the horrors they lived through in the 1990s, when an Islamic insurgency fought the energy-rich country's security services for years and around 200,000 people were killed.

Today's protests are a family affair. Young couples come out to march with babies in slings or strollers and small children on their fathers' shoulders. Even in crowded streets, protesters make way for demonstrators in wheelchairs. On the edges, families sit on benches and eat picnic lunches – and clean up after themselves.

The tidy revolutionaries have drawn attention in France, where yellow vest protesters have been holding their own weekly protests for 21 weeks, and where protest violence has left stores and restaurants trashed or burned out or boarded up.

By contrast, in Algeria – once the jewel in France's colonial crown –

protesters and local businesses are on the same side, and police rarely intervene.

The Algerian movement succeeded in forcing Bouteflika from office this week, and is continuing to keep up pressure on a political elite seen as corrupt and repressive.

As Algeria's Friday protests wind down, volunteers walk backwards along the march route, scooping up water bottles, protest signs or anything else left behind.

By Saturday morning, little sign is left of what happened the day before.





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Algerians abroad return home, seeing hope in protest movement
Bouteflika seeks forgiveness from Algerians

[Erdogan's ruling AKP ready to accept Turkey's election recount results](#)

Sat, 2019-04-06 20:17

ISTANBUL: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling AKP will accept the results of local election recounts in Ankara and Istanbul no matter which party is declared the winner, a party spokesman said on Saturday.

The AKP won most votes nationwide in last Sunday's election, but results showed the ruling party lost Ankara and was also narrowly defeated in Istanbul in what would be one of their worst setbacks in a decade and a half in power.

Electoral authorities are conducting a recount in scores of districts in Ankara and in Istanbul where tallies showed the opposition CHP candidate Ekrem Imamoglu with a very slim lead over the AKP.

“At the end of the day, we will accept the final result regardless of whether it is to our advantage or disadvantage,” AKP spokesman Omer Celik told a briefing for the foreign press in Istanbul.

Voters may have punished the AKP at the ballot box, with Turkey’s economy in recession after a currency crisis last year that hit Turkish households hard when the lira lost 30 percent of its value.

Losing Istanbul would be a blow to Erdogan, who built his political career as mayor of the city before becoming prime minister and later president.

In Istanbul, CHP candidate Imamoglu and the AKP’s Binali Yildirim both declared victory when preliminary results showed them in a dead heat.

The AKP later appealed saying it had found irregularities in tens of thousands of votes.

Imamoglu’s party said on Saturday he was still ahead by close to 18,000 votes with half of the recount completed. He has said he expects the recount to be finished by the end of the weekend, but the AKP could still appeal again to the Supreme Electoral Council.

Celik said the AKP would still control districts and municipal councils in both of the key cities even if they lost the mayor’s offices. But he said the party would not deliberately block opposition mayor’s agendas.

Erdogan, in power for 16 years, fought hard before the vote, holding rallies across Turkey where he described the election of mayors and district councils as a battle for the nation’s survival.



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