

Bill Shorten's latest failure

Labor Leader Bill Shorten's shock admission today that he has not been personally briefed on the disastrous consequences of his support for the 'Phelps' Bill is an indictment on his leadership.

Baghdad anger at Trump plan for US troops in Iraqi base

Author:

Thu, 2019-02-07 00:09

BAGHDAD: Iraq's most powerful Shiite cleric joined criticism on Wednesday of President Donald Trump's plan to keep US troops in Iraq to counter Iran.

Iraq wants good relations with all its neighbors "based on mutual interests and without intervention in internal affairs," and "rejects being a launching pad for harming any other country," Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani said.

Trump said last week that US troops should remain at Al-Asad Air Base in western Iraq, which belongs to the Iraqi army.

"We spent a fortune on building this incredible base," he said. "We might as well keep it. And one of the reasons I want to keep it is because I want to be looking a little bit at Iran because Iran is a real problem."

Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi reminded Trump that there were no US bases in Iraq and called on him to retract his statements.

President Barham Saleh said Trump had not asked for permission to use Iraqi territory to monitor Iran. "Don't burden Iraq with your own issues," he said.

Trump's comments added to concerns in Iraq about America's long-term intentions, particularly after it withdraws its troops from Syria. However, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo assured allies on Wednesday that the pullout was only tactical and called on them to recommit to permanently defeating Daesh in Syria and Iraq.

"US troops withdrawing from Syria is not the end of America's fight," Pompeo said. "The fight is one we will continue to wage alongside you. To that end, we ask that our coalition partners seriously and rapidly consider requests that will enable our efforts to continue. Those requests are likely to come very soon."



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Pompeo reassures allies of US commitments in Syria, Iraq Trump wants US military in Iraq to 'watch Iran' -CBS interview

[**Egypt opposition rejects move to extend EL-Sisi's rule**](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-02-06 22:08

CAIRO: Egyptian opposition parties have formed a coalition against proposed changes to the constitution that would allow President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi to stay in office well beyond the end of his current term in 2022, two opposition leaders said on Wednesday.

Egypt's Parliament has given its preliminary approval to the changes, after two-thirds of the general committee endorsed the proposed amendments on Tuesday.

The 596-seat assembly – which is packed with El-Sisi supporters – will take a final vote on Feb. 17, but the amendments would also need to be put to a national referendum.

Abdel-Aziz El-Husseini, a senior leader in the Karama, or Dignity party, said that 11 parties met the previous day and declared their opposition to the proposed changes.

The group established a “union for the defense of the constitution” that includes secular and left-leaning parties and lawmakers, he added.

Khaled Dawood, another opposition leader and former head of the liberal Dostour, or Constitution party, questioned the legitimacy of the process to amend the 2014 charter, citing a constitutional clause that bars extending the two-term limit.

“We will challenge the proposed amendment before the country’s Supreme Constitutional Court,” he said. Amending the constitution was widely expected. Pro-government lawmakers and media figures have argued for years that the constitution is crippling the president’s efforts to advance the country, including overhauling its economy and defeating militants.

El-Sisi himself said in 2015 that “the constitution was drafted with good intentions.”

A draft of the proposed amendments shows concerted efforts by the pro-government “Supporting Egypt” coalition to consolidate El-Sisi’s power. The 64-year-old leader could be allowed to run for a third and fourth six-year term, potentially extending his rule to 2034.

Talaat Khalil, a lawmaker attending Monday’s meeting, decried the proposed changes, especially a broad clause stating the military’s duty is to protect “the constitution and democracy and the fundamental makeup of the country and its civil nature.”

He told a press conference on Monday that this could allow the armed forces to support one politician at the cost of another. “And this is a great danger,” he said.

Experts say opposition parties are too weak to effectively challenge the amendments amid an unprecedented crackdown on dissent.

In another development, the Istanbul governor’s office on Wednesday said Turkey will investigate the deportation of an Egyptian facing execution in Cairo over a car bomb and has suspended eight policemen involved.

Mohamed Abdelhafiz Ahmed Hussein, whom the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood movement identifies as a member, was among 28 people sentenced in absentia to death in July 2017 for killing Egypt’s public prosecutor in the attack, according to state media.

He was sent back to Egypt last month from Istanbul’s main Ataturk airport on arrival from Somalia for not having a visa.

The case adds to strained Turkey-Egypt relations since the army ousted President Mohamed Mursi, of the Brotherhood, following mass protests against his rule in 2013.

The Istanbul governor's office said on Tuesday that when Hussein arrived, there was no information he was facing trial anywhere, and he did not request protection, so officials deemed him an "unacceptable passenger" due to lack of a Turkish visa.

In a separate statement on Wednesday, the governor's office said a commission had been set up to investigate the deportation and eight police officers were suspended from duty over it.

An adviser to Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan said it was wrong to repatriate anyone facing charges in Egypt and the matter needed checking.

"During the leadership of (Egyptian President Abdel Fattah) Sisi, Turkey has not and does not hand over anyone facing the death penalty or any other charges," Yasin Aktay wrote in the pro-government Yeni Safak newspaper on Wednesday.



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Egypt MPs table law amendment to extend El-Sisi rule
Egypt mulls changing constitution to keep El-Sisi in power

Parents in Egypt say 'no' to female genital mutilation

Author:

Wed, 2019-02-06 21:48

BEIRUT: Doctors at two Cairo hospitals will pin blue ribbon badges to the clothing of newborn baby girls on Wednesday as they launch a campaign to persuade parents in Egypt to “say no to female genital mutilation (FGM).”

The country has the highest number of women affected by FGM in the world, with nearly nine in 10 having been cut, according to UN data.

Parents will receive the badges – which resemble the Arabic word “no” and look like an upside down version of awareness ribbons for HIV/AIDS and breast cancer – after signing a pledge that they will not have their daughters cut.

Activists hope more hospitals will join the campaign, which launches on International Day of Zero Tolerance for FGM.

FGM was banned in Egypt in 2008 and criminalized in 2016, but the practice persists, with most procedures now carried out by health professionals.

Many families see FGM as a religious obligation and a way to preserve their daughter’s virginity.

“It is a wrong and ugly belief. We have to make clear that FGM (does not stop) sexual desire,” said pediatric doctor Amira Edris who works at one of the Cairo hospitals.

“I have a veil on my head and I respect religious rules ... but this is not a religious rule – it is a false belief,” she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

FGM, which commonly involves the partial or total removal of the external genitalia, is practiced in a swathe of African countries and parts of Asia and the Middle East.

It is often done by traditional cutters with unsterilized blades, but there is an increasing trend for FGM to be carried out by health professionals – particularly in Egypt, Guinea, Kenya, Nigeria and Sudan.

Global anti-FGM group 28 Too Many, which is working with the Egyptian hospitals, said the “medicalization of FGM” was hindering efforts to end the practice.

“By having the backing of hospitals in the campaign, we are showing that FGM is wrong, wherever it is carried out,” said 28 Too Many founder Ann-Marie Wilson.

FGM can cause a host of serious health problems including infections and infertility.

There has been mounting concern over the practice in Egypt following the deaths of several girls during botched procedures.

Edris said she had been particularly affected by the death of a 7-year-old girl from FGM.

“We couldn’t save her ... she bled to death. I remember she started to hallucinate ... and she knew she was going to die – this really traumatized me,” she said.

Amel Fahmy, director of women’s advocacy group Tadwein which is backing the campaign, said doctors were ideally placed to spread awareness of FGM.

“We can’t be shy about this. It’s time to talk about this as a harmful practice, and for doctors to tell parents you shouldn’t do this to your daughter,” she said.

What is female genital mutilation and where does it happen?

World leaders have pledged to eradicate female genital mutilation (FGM) by 2030, but campaigners say the ancient ritual remains deeply entrenched in many places.

International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation on Wednesday will highlight efforts to end the widely condemned practice thought to affect at least 200 million girls and women globally. Here are some facts:

- FGM dates back over 2,000 years and is practiced across many cultures and religions.
- It is practiced in at least 30 countries, mostly in Africa but also in pockets of the Middle East and Asia.
- FGM typically involves the partial or total removal of the external genitalia. In some cases the vaginal opening is sewn up. Other procedures, more common in parts of Asia, include nicking or pricking the clitoris.
- FGM can cause longlasting mental and physical health problems including chronic infections, menstrual problems, infertility, pregnancy and childbirth complications.
- Somalia has the world’s highest FGM prevalence (98 percent of women have been cut), followed by Guinea, Djibouti, Mali and Sierra Leone.
- Of the 28 countries in Africa where FGM is endemic, 22 have legislation criminalizing FGM, although enforcement is generally weak and prosecutions rare.
- Half of all girls who have undergone FGM or are at risk live in three countries – Egypt, Ethiopia and Nigeria – all of which have laws against FGM.

- Chad, Liberia, Mali, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Sudan, which are home to 16 million girls, have no law.
- There is an increasing trend for FGM to be carried out by health professionals rather than traditional cutters, particularly in Egypt, Guinea, Kenya, Nigeria and Sudan.
- The ritual, often justified for cultural or religious reasons, is underpinned by the desire to control female sexuality.
- Somalia and Somaliland are drafting laws against FGM.
- Despite not yet having a law, Somalia announced its first FGM prosecution last year after a 10-year-old girl died.

– Compiled by Reuters



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Female genital mutilation continues as change comes slowly
First female genital mutilation cases to be prosecuted in Britain

Algerian brain drain is pre-election headache for government

Author:

Wed, 2019-02-06 21:32

ALGIERS: No matter who wins Algeria's presidential election, 29-year-old cardiologist Moumen Mohamed plans to seek his fortune elsewhere.

He is one of a growing number of young, educated Algerians who are looking for work in Europe or the Gulf to escape the low salaries imposed by a state-dominated economy at home.

The exodus of doctors, engineers and other highly skilled workers is a headache for a government hoping to engage with its largely youthful electorate ahead of the vote on April 18.

President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, 81, has not said if he will seek a fifth term, although the ruling FLN party, labor unions and business leaders are urging him on.

For young professionals, the question is scarcely relevant. Many feel disconnected from an elite populated by the veterans of Algeria's 1954-1962 war of independence from France, an era they only know about from their grandparents. They want to pursue their careers but feel discouraged by a system that offers low-paid jobs and little opportunity to better themselves.

"I have already done my paperwork to migrate," said Moumen, the cardiologist, who works at a state hospital.

"I am waiting for a response." Nearly 15,000 Algerian doctors work in France now and 4,000 submitted applications to leave their home country last year, according to official figures. The government does not accept all the blame.

"The press has exaggerated the phenomenon ... it is a problem for all Algerians, not just the government," Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia said in response to a reporter's question about young doctors leaving.

But in Europe doctors can earn ten times what they get in Algeria, a socialist economy where medical professionals are paid little more than less skilled public employees.

"Salaries, working conditions are bad, and above all there is no appreciation of doctors," said Mohamed Yousfi, head of the specialist doctors' union.

"Our doctors are filling the medical desert in Western countries like France, Canada and Germany. They are also present in the Gulf," said Yousfi, sitting in his office in the public hospital at Boufarik, a town near Algiers.

The hospital, which opened in 1872, was being refurbished by building workers, and Yousfi said medical equipment was readily available.

Algeria has poured billions of dollars in the health sector in the past decades, with around 50,000 doctors and 150,000 beds available in 2018, official data shows.

The North African oil and gas producing nation guarantees citizens cradle-to-grave welfare, but lack of competition from the private sector means some services are poor.

The country only ranks 85 out of 189 in the Human Development Index of living standards compiled by the United Nations Development Programme. This is behind Western and Eastern Europe, the Gulf and even sanctions-hit Iran.

Many public hospitals do not offer the same level of quality as private clinics, which have been slowly opening. Those who can afford it go abroad for treatment.

"We are not respected as we should be as long as our dignitaries, ministers and generals continue to seek treatment overseas," said a doctor who asked not to be named.

Doctors are not the only ones who want to migrate. Pilots, computer engineers, oil drillers and even journalists are also heading for the airport, privately owned Algerian media report.

Around 10,000 engineers and drillers from the state energy firm Sonatrach have left the company in the past ten years, according to senior company officials. "If nothing is done to improve working conditions and salaries, more and more will leave," a Sonatrach source said.

Most professionals head for the Gulf, where they earn good salaries.

"I left Algeria in 2015. I am a computer engineer and I am now in Oman working for a big telecoms firm," Messaoud Benali, 39, said by phone.

"I know plenty of educated Algerians who work in Gulf countries," he said.

Bouteflika must say whether he will run or not by March 3, according to the constitution.

If he does, he is expected to win despite his poor health, because the opposition remains weak and fragmented, analysts say. But how the ruling elite can connect with young people is another question altogether.

Algeria has one of the world's slowest Internet speeds, but its young people are still very tech-savvy.

This became clear when 21-year-old singer Farouk Boujemline invited fans via Snapchat to celebrate his birthday in the center of Algiers.

About 10,000 showed up, jamming the traffic for hours, and police had to set

up barriers around the city's independence monument to make sure the party didn't get out of control.

By contrast, Bouteflika, Prime Minister Ouyahia and several other ministers do not have Twitter accounts to communicate with the public.

Algeria is one of the few countries where government ministries still use fax machines to communicate with the outside world.

"How to reconnect with the young elite, this is the top priority for Algeria's next president," said political analyst Ferrahi Farid.

In the past, authorities could ensure public support by increasing salaries or extending the welfare state.

When riots erupted in Algiers in 2011, the government sought to prevent any spread of the Arab Spring uprisings by offering billions to pay for salary increases, interest-free loans, and thousands of jobs in the public sector.

But 95 percent of government income depends on oil and gas revenues, which halved in the years from 2014 to 2017, forcing officials to impose a public hiring freeze.

"When the oil price is \$100 you can do a lot, but when it is \$50 there is not much you can do," Farid said.



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Algeria plans solar energy tenders to tackle rising electricity needs
Algerian President Bouteflika, 82, to run for 5th term