

Egyptian referendum first major test of democracy

BIG TURNOUT

Some critics fear vote will strengthen Islamist group

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CAIRO — Eager for their first taste of a free vote in decades, Egyptians lined up by the hundreds Saturday to vote on constitutional amendments sponsored by the ruling military that critics fear could propel the country's largest Islamist group to become Egypt's most dominant political force.

The nationwide referendum is the first major test of the country's transition to democracy after a popular uprising forced longtime leader Hosni Mubarak to step down five weeks ago, handing the reins of power to the military.

Underscoring the tensions beneath the euphoria, however, a crowd of angry men pelted reform campaigner Mohamed ElBaradei and a group of his supporters with rocks, bottles and cans outside a polling center at Cairo's Mokattam district.

ElBaradei, who also was the former head of the U.N. nuclear-watchdog agency, wasn't injured but was forced to flee in an SUV without casting his ballot. The crowd also smashed the car windows and shouted, "You traitor. We don't want you." ElBaradei supporters at the



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Egyptian women line up at a polling station Saturday in Cairo to vote on the referendum.

plain of discrimination and fear their quest for equal

rights would suffer a serious setback if the Brotherhood

gains influence in post-Mubarak Egypt.

More than half of Egypt's 80 million people are eligible voters. The military, in a bid to get the vote out, has decreed that they would be allowed to cast ballots at any polling center in the country with their national ID cards — issued to those 18 and older — as the only required proof of identity.

Lack of faith in the process, along with violence and intimidation, has kept most voters away from past elections. But Egyptians — buoyed by the mass protests that led to Mubarak's Feb. 11 ouster — have found a new trust in the system.

"My vote today will make a difference. It's as simple as that," first-time voter Hosam Bishay, 48, said as he waited in line with about 300 others outside a guarded polling center in Cairo's upscale Zamaalek district.

The constitutional amendments drawn up by a panel of military-appointed legal scholars are intended to bring just enough change to the current constitution — suspended by the military af-

ter it came to power — to ensure that upcoming elections are free and fair.

In addition to allowing independent and opposition candidates to run, they would restore full judicial supervision of votes, a measure seen as key to preventing fraud. They would also limit presidents to two four-year terms and curb the emergency laws that have long been a chief complaint of the people.

Blame for attack

The Nobel laureate later tweeted that "organized thugs" were to blame for the attack. In a second Twitter posting, he said figures from the Mubarak regime were seeking to undermine the revolution, referring to the ouster of the former leader. Early signs showed an unusually big turnout, with lines forming before polls opened and snaking along the streets in Cairo and other cities. Men and women stood in separate lines as is customary in the conservative and mainly Muslim nation. The vote promises to be the freest in Egypt since the 1952 ouster of the monarchy. Egypt has since been ruled by men of military background, with fraud and low turnout defining every nationwide vote. "This is a historic day for Egypt," Deputy Prime Minister Yahya al-Garnal said after casting his vote. "I had never seen such large numbers of voters in Egypt. Finally, the people of Egypt have come to realize that their vote counts."

Voters were asked to choose yes or no for the package of nine changes, which would open elections to independent candidates, impose presidential term limits and curtail 30-year-old emergency laws that give police near-unlimited powers. Preliminary results will be announced Sunday. A yes vote would allow parliamentary and presidential elections to be held later this year or early in the next, a time frame that critics say is too soon for the dozens of political groups born out of the 18-day anti-Mubarak uprising to organize themselves and be able to effectively compete in elections.

Critics' charge

Instead, they say, the time frame would benefit Mubarak's one-time ruling National Democratic Party and the Muslim Brotherhood — archivals and the two most powerful and best-organized political groups in Egypt. The NDP is blamed for the rampant corruption and the fraud that marred every election in Egypt during Mubarak's 29-year rule. The Brotherhood, which has strongly campaigned for the adoption of the changes, advocates the installment of an Islamic government in Egypt. The