Egypt's Opposition Urges 'No' Vote In Referendum

MAGGIE MICHAEL

Associated Press

CAIRO — Egypt's opposition called on its followers Wednesday to vote "no" in a crucial referendum on a disputed constitution drafted by Islamist supporters of President Mohammed Morsi.

The decision came as Morsi's government forged ahead with its own plan, starting overseas voting in diplomatic missions for expatriates.

The moves reinforced the atmosphere of a nation in crisis, deeply divided over whether Egypt might move toward Islamic theocracy or retain its secular traditions. More opposition protests were planned, judges remained on strike and there were concerns of further economic disarray after Egypt delayed a \$4.8 billion IMF loan needed to revive the economy.

Wednesday's call for a "no" vote followed a prolonged debate within the opposition over whether to boycott the referendum — a threat that still hung in the air as the anti-Morsi camp laid down its conditions for participation.

These included full judicial

supervision, independent and international monitors, and adequate security. If they were not met, Morsi's opponents said, the opposition would call a last-minute

On Tuesday, the vast majority of Egypt's judges rejected any role in overseeing the referendum.

Egypt's crisis began on Nov. 22 when Morsi issued decrees, since rescinded, that placed him above judicial oversight. At the heart of the standoff now is the draft charter, which Morsi's opponents contend allows religious authorities too much influence over legislation, threatens to restrict freedom of expression and opens the door to Islamist control over day-to-day

The fallout has left Egypt the most divided it has been since Hosni Mubarak's ouster nearly two years ago. It pits Morsi, his Muslim Brotherhood and ultraconservative Islamists on one side, against the rest of the country, including liberals, leftists and Christians, on

On Wednesday, Hamdeen Sabahi of the National Salvation Front, the main opposition group, urged followers to "topple the constitution by voting 'no" on

"The constitution is a decisive

battle but not the final one," said Ahmed Khairi of the opposition Free Egyptians party. "We will keep on fighting for our demands and for Egypt to become a country for all. This will not be the end.'

The opposition's chances of overturning the charter hinge on whether it can bring out its supporters to the polls. The Islamists are disciplined voters and have portrayed a "yes" vote as one for Islam and a "no" vote as one for immorality.

An Islamist-dominated panel rushed through the draft constitution in a marathon session last month. Islamists say its approval will restore political stability and allow the rebuilding of state institutions.

The nationwide referendum was initially scheduled to take place on Dec. 15, but on Tuesday, Morsi ordered the voting stretched into another day on Dec. 22. Voting must be overseen by judges and their absence could cast doubt on the legitimacy of the vote and thus the constitution itself

Zaghloul el-Balshi, head of the referendum's organizing committee, said on Tuesday that 9,000 judges had agreed to oversee the voting, though his claim could not be independently verified.

Egypt has nearly 13,000 polling

station, each of which normally requires a judge. Aides to Morsi have said judges are only needed to supervise the 9,000 main stations, while government employees or university lecturers can fill in at the rest.

The start of overseas voting after nearly three weeks of opposition protests showed Morsi's determination to go forward with the

The vote by half a million expatriates overseas could give hints about which way the referendum is going. Egyptian expatriates in the Gulf are known to lean toward the Islamists, while those in Europe, North America and Australia, among them a large number of Christian migrants, lean more toward the liberals.

'We are against what is happening in Egypt nowadays. I am not against Mohamed Morsi, but there are things happening and we need to take a decision before the beginning of a war in Egypt," said Hakim Ousama, an Egyptian living in Paris, as he prepared to cast his

Islamists who support the draft constitution have been distributing flyers and posters to urge a 'yes" vote, and have used mosques to get out their message. The opposition, for its part, has

launched ad campaigns on independent TV networks, featuring the catch phrase: "I don't approve of the constitution that divides

In a move likely to stoke the judges' anger, Egypt's top prosecutor, Morsi appointee Talaat Abdullah, removed the judge in charge of an investigation into violence outside the presidential palace last week that began when Islamists loyal to Morsi set upon opposition

protesters staging a sit-in.
The judge, Mustafa Khater, had ordered the release from detention of most suspects for lack of evidence, a move that drew criticism from Mohammed Badie, the influential head of Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood.

Human Rights Watch, meanwhile, called on authorities to investigate the detention and abuse of opposition protesters by Brotherhood supporters during last week's clashes.

In another twist, Egypt's military withdrew a call for talks with the opposition, one day after proposing it.

Defense Minister Abdel-Fatah el-Sissi decided to postpone the talks because "the response to the invitation was below expectations," military spokesman Col. Ahmed Mohammed Ali was quoted

by the official MENA news agency as saying. He did not elaborate.

That announcement came just as the opposition said it was willing to attend the meeting. El-Sissi's call was the second time in less than a week that the generals addressed the crisis. On Saturday, the military warned of "disastrous consequences" if the crisis is not resolved.

The cancellation was likely made under pressure from Morsi, who has been adamant that the military must stick to its core security mission.

With the military now weighing in, Egypt may face further divisions.

"The military is boiling. The military doesn't live in isolation from the street and what is happening there. We have judges on strike, a constitutional court under siege," said retired army general Hossam Sweilam, a military analyst who is widely thought to be close to the military leadership.

"We have large sectors of Egyptians rejecting the referendum and we have so many ways to postpone it. But the stubborn leadership is insisting on going forward with the process. All this is reflected on the armed forces," he

Senate Dems Offer Sandy Disaster Aid Package

BY ANDREW MIGA Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Senate Democrats on Wednesday finished cobbling together a \$60.4 billion disaster aid package for New York, New Jersey and other states hit by Superstorm Sandy in late

October. Working from the emergency spending request President Barack Obama made five days ago, the Senate Appropriations Committee released its draft of

the legislation. While the proposal calls for \$60.4 billion, the Congressional Budget Office estimates that only about \$9 billion in Obama's request would be spent over the next nine months. An additional \$12 billion would be spent the fol-

The bill is laden with big infrastructure projects that often require years to complete.

The proposal comes with little time left in the final days of a congressional session dominated by an impasse in negotiations between the White House and Republican lawmakers over how to avoid the so-called fiscal cliff of spending cuts and tax increases.

The measure could face a tough fight on Capitol Hill, especially from tea party House Republicans and other fiscal conservatives who favor budget cuts elsewhere to offset some or even all disaster costs.

The aid will help states rebuild public infrastructure like roads and tunnels and help thousands of people displaced from their homes. Sandy was the most costly natural disaster since Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and one of the worst storms ever in the Northeast.

Some Republicans said they want to see more detailed evidence to insure the money is needed to cover storm damages

We need to look and see what the real numbers are," said Rep. Brett Guthrie, R-Ky., a member of the Republican Study Committee, a group of conservative Republicans. "We have had a tragic storm and we need to figure out how to help, but I don't know yet what the actual number should be.'

Republican Sen. Tom Coburn of Oklahoma, a frequent critic of spending he considers wasteful, said Sandy aid should be paid for with spending cuts elsewhere.

Coburn said there was significant waste, fraud and abuse in federal spending related to Hurricane Katrina recovery and he doesn't want the same thing to happen if Sandy aid is rushed through Congress.

They're throwing things to see what will stick to the wall," Coburn said. "Instead, we ought to be ask-

ing hard questions. House Appropriations Chairman Hal Rogers of Kentucky has said Congress may want to begin with a smaller aid package for immediate recovery needs and wait until more data can be collected about storm damages before approving additional money next

The Federal Emergency Management Agency's disaster relief fund still has about \$4.8 billion, enough to pay for recovery efforts into early spring. So far, the government has spent about \$2 billion in the 11 states struck by the storm.







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