

## **Egypt's risky referendum erodes the government's legitimacy**

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### ***Editorial***

Doubts have emerged over the official results of Egypt's controversial referendum on Monday, and the country's opposition parties are already crying foul. Even the country's prestigious Judges Club, which has a long tradition of political independence, has "washed its hands" of the government's reported results, saying that "we will no longer be a fig leaf to cover something shameful." Arguably, the Egyptian government has made a risky wager by putting the controversial constitutional amendments to vote. The state may one day be able to convince the skeptical Egyptian public that the changes were necessary and that the vote was carried out legally. However, while the government may be able to regain the ground it has lost in terms of legality, it may never be able to recoup what has been lost in terms of legitimacy.

One cannot deny that a country's democratic development must proceed in a way and at a pace that are consistent with its own cultural circumstances. Foreign Minister Ahmed Abu al-Gheit drilled this point home during his meeting with visiting US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice over the weekend, just hours ahead of the referendum. Democratic reform is difficult, he told Rice, who acknowledged that Egypt's democratization would experience "ups and downs." Egyptians, it seems, will have to wait for the tides of political circumstances to turn again before they can experience the democratic reforms that President Hosni Mubarak promised to implement when he was elected.  
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Mubarak vowed during his campaign, for example, that he would revisit the country's 26-year-old emergency laws, which suspend basic liberties and grant the state sweeping powers to crack down on political dissent. Only a year after making that pledge, however, the Egyptian Parliament extended the legislation for two more years. Critics, including international rights group Amnesty International, have charged that Monday's referendum, which officially abolished the temporary laws, simultaneously enshrined the measures in the country's Constitution.

Reservoirs of legitimacy are easily depleted and are nearly impossible to refill, and for this reason the Egyptian state is engaging in a dangerous and potentially costly gamble. Actions that are being taken by Egypt's ruling regime are draining the government's spring of legitimacy to the point where the state may end up too parched to survive any longer.

Certainly the warning lights are already flashing - even the country's state-appointed human rights body has accused the regime of fraud in the referendum - and the government should be very cautious in the future. Young Egyptians, whose power will continue to grow in the coming years as technology affords them new public spaces, may one day rise up and demand legitimate and democratic-minded leadership.