Draft constitutional changes – Egypt

Why in news?

Egypt recently proposed constitutional changes that could extend the rule of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi until 2034.

What is the background?

- The 2011 revolution in Egypt demanded the overthrow of the then President Hosni Mubarak.
- People complained of poverty, unemployment, corruption and autocratic governance of the president who had ruled the country for 30 years.
- After 18 days of protest, Mubarak resigned as president, handing over power to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces.
- However, Egypt has seen significant macroeconomic improvement since 2011.
- Mr Sisi, who was a former general and defence minister, became president in 2013.
- Government-implemented structural reforms and subsidy cuts recommended by the IMF in his regime have brought the Egypt its highest economic growth in a decade.
- The country is now targeting 5.8% growth for 2019, up from 5.3% last year.
- But soaring prices and double-digit unemployment still persist in the country.
- Also, Egyptian parliament recently pushes ahead for a change in the country's constitution.

What does the constitutional amendment contain?

- The amendments would extend presidential terms from four to six years and allow the current president Mr Sisi to run again after his current term expires in 2022.
- A “transitional article” that would give the “current president” the right to two new terms totalling 12 years would also be inserted into the constitution.
- The president would be allowed to pick the heads of judicial bodies and to oversee a new council charged with looking after the affairs of judges.
- Critics fear this may prove a blow to the notion of an independent judiciary.
- Another change would confer a political role for the army to “protect” the constitution, democracy and the “civilian” nature of the state.

- This amendment would formalise the military's already considerable influence over public life.
- However, it has not been spelt out how these new powers would be exercised.
- More than 80% of MPs in the 596 seat-assembly approved the proposed constitutional changes.
- This will now be reviewed by a special committee before being put to a final vote and should have to be ratified subsequently by a referendum.

What are the concerns?

- Egypt had begun nominal attempts at ushering in a multi-party system in 2005, when Mr. Mubarak got himself elected for a fifth term.
- But within a few months, he declared himself President for life.
- Attempts to switch to popular representative government in the latter part of his tenure were merely on paper.
- The current amendments also propose a similar measure, that Mr. Mubarak did, which would consolidate the position of Mr. Sisi.
- The military has been so powerful and there have been frequent military crackdown on the dissenters.
- The president has also leveraged the American and the Russian governments effectively, which is revealed by the indifference that both these countries show to the Egyptian military's excesses.
- Egypt also similarly benefits from the strategic partnership it signed with China, bringing trade flows and investment.
- Thus, the proposed constitutional changes show that Egypt is sinking deeper into dictatorship.
- These amendments effectively serve to destroy the constitutional separation of powers, concentrating all authority into the president's hands and solidifying his authoritarian rule.

What would be the course of action?

- There is a simmering anger among sections of the youth contending with unemployment and the absence of avenues for dissent.
- Despite this, a referendum is expected soon and with no organised opposition and a tightly controlled press, it is expected that the changes will be approved.

Source: The Hindu



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