

TURKEY SETS APRIL 16 FOR VOTE TO EXPAND ERDOGAN POWERS

ISTANBUL: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Friday rubber-stamped controversial constitutional changes that will boost his own powers, paving the way for a referendum on the legislation in April. The government says the proposals to create an executive presidency will simplify the government structure, but opponents fear they will lead to one-man rule in Turkey. "People will have the final say," Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmus said in comments carried by the Anadolu news agency, announcing that the referendum would take place on April 16.

Parliament in January approved a new 18-article constitution to create an executive presidency in the NATO member state along the lines of the

system in France and the United States. Brawls erupted between lawmakers during debates over the bill, highlighting the divisive nature of the changes, the most far-reaching constitutional shift since the creation of modern Turkey in 1923. Erdogan approved the legislation six months after an attempted coup against him by a rogue military faction in July last year.

Under the new constitution, the president will have strengthened executive powers to directly appoint top public officials including ministers. The post of prime minister, currently held by Erdogan loyalist Binali Yildirim, would be replaced with one or more vice presidents. Erdogan's supporters say the changes are necessary for

effective government and to avoid fragile and unstable coalitions that were a feature of Turkey's political scene in the past. The bill also calls for parliamentary and presidential elections to be held at the same time, with the draft giving November 3, 2019 as the date of the next ballot.

Unpredictable adventure

The referendum campaign is due to formally kick off on February 25, with Kurtulmus expressing hope that it would reflect "the maturity of Turkish democracy." "Everyone—those who say 'yes' and those who say 'no' will express their views," he said. The main opposition has accused Erdogan—seen as increasingly autocratic after 14 years in power as

both prime minister and president—of trying to decapitate parliament. "Now we will take power from the parliament and give it to one man," Kemal Kilicdaroglu, head of the secular Republican People's Party (CHP), said in a televised speech.

"Can Turkey be dragged into an unpredictable adventure? Did we find the republic for this," he said. Erdogan, the most powerful Turkish politician since founding father Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, became president in August 2014, in the first ever direct elections for a Turkish head of state. But there have been suggestions that the clock on his presidency will start from zero from 2019 as the new constitution creates a new presidential role.—AFP

YEMEN LOYALISTS RETAKE RED SEA COASTAL TOWN

ADEN: Yemeni government forces took full control of the Red Sea coastal town of Mokha yesterday after weeks of deadly fighting with Shiite rebels and their allies, a spokesman said. Before the 19th Century, Mokha was Yemen's main port and export hub for coffee grown in the highlands and its historical symbolism meant it was fiercely fought over. "We have done with the Battle of Mokha," armed forces spokesman Mohammed al-Naqib said, adding that the rebels had been forced to flee the town. Another loyalist military source confirmed that government forces were in "full control".

The rebels had put up fierce resistance in the town. Twenty-four rebels and eight loyalist troops were killed in fighting on Wednesday alone. Tens of thousands of civilians were trapped in the fighting. Many of them had sought refuge in Mokha after fleeing their homes in towns to the south as government forces pushed up the coast. The UN humanitarian coordinator in Yemen, Jamie McGoldrick, said late last month that "scores of civilians" had been killed or wounded by shelling and sniper fire around Mokha or by air strikes carried out in support of government forces by a Saudi-led coalition. He said most services in the town had ground to a halt, including the mains water supply.

Next target Hodeida

Government forces had already taken Mokha's docks earlier this month but there was heavy fighting in other parts of the town before the rebels withdrew north towards the main Red Sea port city of Hodeida, which they still control. "We now preparing for the second phase of the battle for the coast, which is to advance towards Hodeida," the loyalist armed forces spokesman said. Before the government launched its offensive on January 7, the rebels controlled virtually Yemen's entire 450 kilometer Red Sea coastline.

But with the support of the Saudi-led coalition, the loyalists have made their biggest advances in months in heavy fighting that has seen more than 400 combatants killed. Despite nearly two years of coalition air and ground support, government forces had previously been almost entirely confined to the south and areas along the Saudi border. The rebels hold the capital Sanaa and most of the northern and central highlands as well as the coast around Hodeida. The coalition has enforced an air and sea blockade of rebel-held territory that prevented the rebels making any use of Mokha's small docks.

All deliveries of basic goods are under UN supervision and those by sea pass through Hodeida making the port city vital to the rebels. Late last month, the rebels carried out a rare seaborne attack on a Saudi frigate on patrol in the Red Sea, killing two sailors. Last year, there were missile attacks from rebel-held territory on two US warships in the Red Sea and a United Arab Emirates vessel contracted to the coalition.—AFP

IRANIANS MARCH AGAINST TRUMP THREATS ON REVOLUTION DAY

'ANYONE THREATENING IRAN WILL REGRET IT'

TEHRAN: Millions of Iranians marched on the anniversary of the 1979 Islamic revolution yesterday in what the president described as a response to the new US administration and a rejection of "threatening language". President Hassan Rouhani joined hundreds of thousands at an anniversary march through the capital, one of dozens of such events around the country. "This turnout is a response to false remarks by the new rulers in the White House and the people are telling the world through their presence that the Iranian people must be spoken to with respect," Rouhani said.

"Iranians will make those using threatening language against this nation regret it. "Anyone threatening Iran's government and armed forces should know that our nation is vigilant." US President Donald Trump has taken an increasingly strident line towards Iran since taking office last month, warning that it was "playing with fire" and "on notice".

Last week, he imposed sanctions on Iran over a Jan 29 ballistic missile test and officials warned more might follow. Last weekend, new Pentagon chief James Mattis described Iran as "the single biggest state sponsor of terrorism in the world." Placards bearing slogans against Trump were brandished by the marchers as they weaved their way through the streets of the capital in the wintry fog to the central Azadi (Freedom) Square.

Not scared of threats

One placard showed a caricature of Trump being punched by a hand wearing a bracelet of the Iranian flag. "Thanks Mr. Trump for revealing true face of the US," said another placard echoing comments made by supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in a speech this week. "Iranians are not scared of threats," said another, bearing the faces of Trump, British Prime Minister Theresa May and her Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu. The United States and Britain have long been derided by the regime as the "great Satan" and the "little Satan". Iran does not accept Israel's right to exist.



TEHRAN: Iranian school girls wave national flags during an annual rally commemorating the anniversary of the 1979 Islamic revolution, which toppled the late pro-US Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, in Tehran, Iran, yesterday.—AP

The rhetoric had been toned down after a July 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and world powers including the United States. But at yesterday's marches, the traditional "Down with America" slogans were everywhere. Some marchers made a distinction between the American people and the Trump administration and carried placards thanking those who had opposed the president's controversial visa ban on the citizens of Iran and six other predominantly Muslim countries. The ban was suspended by a lower court a week later and a federal appeals court on Thursday refused to reinstate it but Trump vowed to continue the legal battle for his order to stand.

"Down with US regime, long live American people," said one placard in English. "Thanks American people for supporting Muslims," said another. "American people are welcome and invited to visit Iran," said a third. The posters were following a Twitter hashtag #LoveBeyondFlags started by Iranian users to thank Americans who protested against the visa ban. Trump has made no

secret of his opposition to the nuclear deal agreed by his predecessor Barack Obama under which Iran agreed to tight controls in return for the lifting of international sanctions. He said Iranians "don't appreciate how 'kind' President Obama was to them," in one tweet.

Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who negotiated the nuclear deal was among the top officials who attended the Tehran march alongside Rouhani. Also present was Major General Ghasem Suleimani, head of the foreign operations arm of the elite Revolutionary Guards and one of the most controversial regime figures for Western governments. Iran's leading reformist, former president Mohammad Khatami whose two terms of office, from 1997 to 2005, saw a rapprochement with the West, was absent. He has been under a strict media ban since mass protests against the 2009 reelection of hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. But he too urged supporters to join yesterday's anniversary commemorations the "neutralize the conspiracies" faced by Iran.—AFP