

Egypt's President El-Sisi raises minimum wage by 67 percent

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By SAMY MAGDY | AP

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Sat, 2019-03-30 18:56

CAIRO: Egypt's President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi on Saturday announced that he has raised the minimum wage to 2,000 Egyptian pounds (\$115.74) per month from 1,200 (\$69.27), a 67 percent increase.

The move came ahead of a possible national referendum on constitutional amendments that would potentially allow him to remain in power until 2034. Egypt's Parliament, which is packed with El-Sisi supporters, overwhelmingly approved a package of constitutional changes last month that would further enshrine the military's role in politics. The supposed referendum is expected to be held in the coming weeks.

El-Sisi said in televised comments the raise will be applied to all Egyptian workers. The move was part of a package of measures, including a raise in pensions and bonuses, intended to ease the burdens of Egyptians hurt by painful austerity measures in recent years. Egypt's Finance Ministry said the increase would kick in in July.

The austerity measures were part of an ambitious economic reform program intended to revive the country's economy mauled by years of political turmoil and violence.

The reforms included floating the currency, substantial cuts in state subsidies on basic goods, and introducing a wide range of new taxes. The measures led to a significant rise in prices and services, something critics say has hurt the poor and middle class the hardest.

The reforms were agreed on with the International Monetary Fund in exchange for a \$12 billion loan.

El-Sisi thanked Egyptians, especially women, for enduring the harsh measures. "Another path would have led to the collapse of the state," he said in a ceremony honoring Egyptian women.

Removing state subsidies is something that El-Sisi's predecessors could not do because of fears of unrest. The late President Anwar Sadat attempted in 1977 to remove subsidies on bread, a main staple for Egyptians, sparking deadly street riots. He backed down. In comparison, El-Sisi's reforms fueled popular discontent but never boiled over onto the streets.

Demonstrations are virtually banned in Egypt under a 2013 law, with offenders facing up to five years in prison if convicted.

The economic reform program has won El-Sisi lavish praise from Egypt's Western backers and bankers. His policies, however, have made more difficult the plight of a majority of Egyptians who are now forced to cope with steep hikes in the price of everything from utilities and fuel to food and transportation.



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Trump to host Egypt's El-Sisi on April 9: White House
Egypt's Sisi names military general as transport minister after train crash

[Libya holds municipal elections in first vote for five years](#)

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Sat, 2019-03-30 19:11

TRIPOLI: Libya held rare municipal elections in nine communities on Saturday, although turnout in the country's first voting for five years reached only about 38 percent.

The North African state, which has been mired in conflict and chaos since the 2011 toppling of Muammar Qaddafi, has not held any elections since 2014, when a heavily contested national vote ended up splitting the country into rival administrations and parliaments.

Only nine out of 69 municipal councils in southern and western Libya voted on Saturday, officials said. No violence or sabotage was reported.

Libya created 120 municipal councils in 2013 in a bid to end 42 years of centralization and one man rule under Qaddafi. Some councils held elections in 2014.

The municipal board of each council includes seven members, which then elects a mayor.

"We'll go on each Saturday until 33 councils hold their elections then we resume after the holy month of Ramadan so all councils are elected," Salem Bentahia, head of the elections commission, told Reuters.

The Muslim fasting month of Ramadan ends in early June.

In Zuwara, a town west of Tripoli near the Tunisian border, there was a modest turnout in the morning.

"We wish every success to this board and for it to achieve all the aspirations of this city's residents in all areas," Abdulsalam Ramdan Abdulsalam said as he cast his vote.

The United Nations is holding a national conference in April in a bid to end the political conflict between the internationally recognized government in Tripoli in the west of Libya and a parallel administration version in the east.

The UN efforts aim to prepare the country for long-delayed national elections.





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Ship hijacked near Libya by migrants rescued at sea
King Salman meets Jordan PM, Libyan commander

[Pope arrives in Morocco for two-day trip](#)

Sat, 2019-03-30 16:04

RABAT: Pope Francis arrived in Morocco on Saturday for a visit which will see him meet Muslim leaders and migrants ahead of a mass with the country's minority Catholic community.

The spiritual leader of the world's 1.3 billion Catholics was invited by King Mohammed VI as part of a mission on the "development of interreligious dialogue", according to Moroccan authorities.

Improving relations with other religions has been a priority for the Argentine pontiff, whose papacy has been marred by a wave of child sex abuse allegations against clergy.

The pope's plane landed in the capital Rabat shortly before 2 pm (1300 GMT) and he was greeted by the king who is known as the "commander of the faithful" in Morocco, where 99 percent of the population is Muslim. The Moroccan capital has stepped up security ahead of the first papal visit to the North African country since John Paul II in 1985.



Pope Francis, on the popemobile, and Moroccan King Mohammed VI, right, waving, make their way through the crowd in Rabat, Morocco, Saturday, March 30, 2019. (AP)

Buildings have been repainted, streets decorated and lawns manicured for the pope's two-day visit.

Francis was to be presented on arrival with dates and almond milk, before stepping into the popemobile and the monarch into a limousine.

They were to drive to a welcome ceremony at the Tour (or tower) Hassan mosque and a mausoleum, attended by 25,000 and beamed onto giant screens, before the king hosts Francis at the royal palace.

Wellwishers began packing the esplanade outside the 12th century incomplete mosque from midday as rain drizzled on them while others, including many Moroccans in traditional costume, lined the roads nearby.

Red carpets covered the ground at the entrance to the esplanade and two armchairs, red as well, were placed on a platform in front of the mosque.

Dear Moroccan friends, I am coming as a pilgrim of peace and fraternity. We Christians and Muslims believe in God, the Creator and the Merciful, who created people to live like brothers and sisters, respecting each other in their diversity, and helping one another in their needs.

– Pope Francis (@Pontifex) [March 29, 2019](#)

Pope Francis and Morocco's King Mohammed VI on Saturday declared Jerusalem the "common patrimony of humanity and especially the followers of the three monotheistic religions," during the pontiff's visit to Rabat.

"The specific multi-religious character, the spiritual dimension and the particular cultural identity of Jerusalem... must be protected and promoted," they said in a joint statement released by the Vatican.

Francis will also visit an institute where around 1,300 students are studying to become imams and preachers, teaching "moderate Islam" and backed by the king.

"It's a very significant event, the first time that a pope is welcomed to an institute for the training of imams," said Vatican spokesman Alessandro Gisotti.

During the visit, Francis is due to hear from two students – one African and one European – as well as a statement by Morocco's Ministry of Islamic Affairs.

A concert drawing inspiration from Islam, Christianity and Judaism is also on the agenda.

Last month Francis visited the United Arab Emirates, where he met with Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayeb, the imam of Cairo's Al-Azhar, Sunni Islam's prestigious seat of learning.

The two signed a document on "human fraternity for world peace", which among other things called for "freedom of belief" and "full citizenship" rights for minorities.

Francis will not hesitate to refer to the text, which from now on he will give to all heads of state, Gisotti said.

In Morocco, where Islam is the state religion, authorities are keen to stress the country's "religious tolerance" which allows Christians and Jews to worship freely.

But Moroccans are automatically considered Muslim if they are not born into the Jewish community, apostasy is socially frowned upon, and proselytising is criminalised.

Those who try to "rock the faith of a Muslim or to convert him to another religion" risk a prison term of up to three years.



The honor guard waits for Pope Francis to arrive in Rabat, Morocco, Saturday, March 30, 2019. (AP)

After years in the shadows, since 2017 the small number of converts have called openly for the right to live “without persecution” and “without discrimination”.

Around 30,000 to 35,000 Catholics live in Morocco, many of them from sub-Saharan Africa.

The pope is due to finish his Saturday schedule by meeting migrants at a centre run by Catholic humanitarian organisation Caritas.

The charity runs day centres for migrants who are trying to reach Europe across the Mediterranean, as well as supporting their access to services.

The number of people taking the sea route from Morocco to Spain has increased recently due to the closure of the border with Libya.

In 2017, Caritas centres in Rabat, Casablanca and Tangier welcomed 7,551 new arrivals, according to the charity.

Rabat claims to have a “humanistic” approach to migration and rejects allegations by rights groups of “brutal arrest campaigns” and “forced displacement” to the country’s southern border.

Francis has throughout his papacy highlighted the plight of migrants and refugees, calling on Catholics as well as politicians to show solidarity with those in need.

On Sunday, the pope will celebrate mass at a Rabat stadium with an estimated 10,000 people attending.









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Pope to broaden Muslim dialogue with Morocco visitMorocco Christians urge religious freedom before pope visit

[Foreign ministers prepare draft resolutions ahead of Arab Summit](#)

Sat, 2019-03-30 15:59

TUNIS: Arab foreign ministers prepared a number of draft resolutions on Friday ahead of the 30th Arab League Summit in the Tunisian capital.

The preparatory meeting covered several issues tabled for discussion at the summit, and adopted a number of draft resolutions that will be submitted to Arab leaders on Sunday.

The draft resolutions deal with the Palestinian cause, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the occupied Syrian Golan Heights, and developments in Syria, Yemen

and Libya.

The meeting condemned Iranian interference in Arab states' internal affairs as a violation of international law, the principle of good neighborliness and the sovereignty of states.

The meeting demanded that Tehran cease provocative acts that undermine confidence-building, threaten regional security and stability, and fuel sectarian conflicts.

A draft resolution strongly condemns the continued firing of Iranian-made ballistic missiles by the Houthi militia in Yemen at Saudi Arabia, including Makkah, Islam's holiest city. The Tehran-backed Houthis have launched 200 missiles at the Kingdom.

The draft resolution also denounces Iran's continued interference in Bahrain's internal affairs by supporting terrorism, training terrorists, smuggling arms and explosives, and inciting sectarian strife.

The draft resolution stresses the need for Tehran to stop supporting groups that fuel sectarian conflicts, especially in the Arab Gulf states, and to stop financing militias and armed groups in Arab countries.

The foreign ministers also prepared a draft resolution on Iran's occupation of the three Emirati islands of Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa. The draft resolution affirms the UAE's absolute sovereignty over its three islands.



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Syria's return to Arab League not on summit agenda: spokesman King Salman and Tunisian President hold bilateral talks

[Pro-Kurdish party members detained before Turkey's elections](#)

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Sat, 2019-03-30 12:03

ISTANBUL: A pro-Kurdish party in Turkey says party members have been detained in the lead-up to Sunday's municipal elections.

The Peoples' Democratic Party, or HDP, said in a statement Saturday that 53 people were detained in Istanbul overnight. They include candidates running for municipal council seats. It said the detentions were an attack on the party that would mar the legitimacy of the elections.

Turkey's private Demirören news agency said anti-terror police conducted simultaneous raids in multiple Istanbul districts.

The government accuses the HDP of links to outlawed Kurdish militants, and 10 lawmakers, 40 mayors and thousands of activists remain jailed. On Saturday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan repeated the accusation and called the party "terror lovers."

The HDP says it's running in the elections through legal, democratic means to regain seats in the predominantly Kurdish southeast.



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Kurds to rally in Turkey ahead of key local elections
Despite talk of returns, Turkey quietly works to integrate Syrian refugees