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Egypt pushes ahead with controversial law



Egypt's Islamist-led parliament on Wednesday pushed ahead with a controversial judicial law, despite a rising uproar among judges and the opposition who fear Islamists' control over courts. The judiciary, with mostly secular-minded professional judges, is seen by many Egyptians as the only remaining buffer against Islamists' monopoly of power following the ouster of authoritarian ruler Hosni Mubarak in 2011. Since then, Islamist parties have swept most polls and dominated legislative councils and the presidency, the country's top executive post. The opposition vowed to escalate a campaign against the bill and judges called for emergency meeting later in the day. Presidential spokesman Ihab Fahmy told reporters on Wednesday that the Islamist president respects the judges and has assured them that he won't accept an assault on the judiciary. "The president is keen on containing the judiciary crisis," he said. He added: "The president firmly stressed that it's unacceptable to hurt or encroach on the judiciary." Egypt's President Mohammed Mursi has been fighting with judiciary since he was elected last summer. Last year, courts disbanded the parliament, dominated by Islamists, over unconstitutionality of the election law and last month challenged a parliamentary elections law. Mursi has waged a campaign against the judiciary and the country's most prestigious Supreme Constitutional Court, saying judges were plotting conspiracies against his administration. At the same time as Fahmy's remarks, the legislative committee of the upper house, which was seated as a transitional parliament, voted in favor of three draft laws on the judiciary proposed by Islamist groups and opened the floor for further debate. One proposed by Mursi's Freedom and Justice party, the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood group, drops the retirement age for judges from 70 to 60, which would affect nearly a quarter of Egypt's 13,000 judges and prosecution officials. The draft also would bar the courts from reviewing or overturning the presidential decrees issued by Mursi late last year. The same proposal mandates that judges oversee polling stations and punish those who refuse to carry their duties - a job that used to be voluntarily. Last year, during the vote over a controversial draft of the country's new constitution that was written by Mursi's allies many judges boycotted the vote to protest a decree that temporarily granted Mursi's decisions immunity from judicial review. The crisis over the judiciary is a reflection of the deep-polarization that split the country into proponents and opponents of Muslim Brotherhood rule and that also prompted resignations of top Mursi's aides and advisers. On Monday, the top legal adviser of Mursi Mohammed Fouad Gadallah resigned. In his three-page resignation letter, he said he wanted to shed light "on the extent of the danger facing the country" at a time when "personal interests are overwhelming national interests." Two days earlier, Justice Minister Ahmed Mekky, an Islamist supporter, submitted his resignation, complaining that Mursi supporters were "trampling" on the judiciary. He too criticized the president's handling of the dispute with the judiciary and failure to reach out to critics. Fahmy, the presidential spokesman, told reporters that Mursi accepted Gadallah resignation and refused to comment on the reasons given in the resignation saying, "this is a personal point of view that we don't comment on." He said that Mursi will form a new panel of legal advisers.