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Egyptian referendum voters must not be harassed or intimidated

Amnesty International has called on the Egyptian authorities to ensure that voters and campaigners are not harassed or intimidated by security forces during today's referendum on constitutional change proposals.

Thousands of people opposed to the constitutional amendments tried to gather yesterday in Cairo's Tahrir Square after Friday prayers but were blocked by military police who forced demonstrators into side streets and prevented them from disrupting traffic.

"It is vital that Egyptians are able to cast their votes freely and without discrimination whether they support or oppose the proposed changes to the Constitution," said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International's director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"This will be an important first test of their expressed commitment to change and it is one that the new Egyptian authorities simply must pass."

At least two protesters were detained for distributing anti-referendum pamphlets but then released after their pamphlets were confiscated, prompting fears of a wider crackdown on opponents of the referendum.

The referendum is to decide on changes to the Constitution recommended by an eight-member committee of legal experts appointed by the Supreme Military Council shortly after it replaced ousted former President Hosni Mubarak.

The committee, made up solely of men, called for the repeal of several articles of the Constitution. These would remove emergency-style powers that had been written into the Constitution, impose a six month limit on any state of emergency unless its extension were approved by referendum, reinstate direct judicial supervision of elections and impose a limit on the number of times the President can hold office.

Opponents of the proposed changes include people who say they were devised without taking account of the views of important sectors of society, including women and youth, and others who contend that they do not go far enough in limiting the powers of the president or are insufficient and that a completely new constitution should be drafted.