

Egypt denies 8 US nonprofits license to operate, including Carter Center

Contributed by AYA BATRAWY
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An Egyptian girl street vendor displays dairy products for sale

CAIRO — Egyptian authorities have denied permission to eight American nonprofit groups to operate locally, including a center headed by former President Jimmy Carter that monitors elections, a ministry official said Monday.

The move to deny permission to The Carter Center and others comes only a month ahead of Egypt's first presidential elections since the ouster of longtime authoritarian leader Hosni Mubarak last year. The rejection of Carter's organization, which tries to ensure free and fair elections by observing votes around the world, raises doubts about whether Egypt's crucial ballot will be transparent.

The licenses were denied because the groups' activities "breach the country's sovereignty," the Social Affairs Ministry official said. He also warned that if any of the groups attempt to operate without permits they will be penalized in accordance with the law, which makes it unlikely that The Carter Center would be allowed to observe the upcoming vote.

The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to brief the media.

The presidential race is already wracked with tension after the election commission disqualified 10 candidates, including the two top Islamist front-runners.

Many Egyptians question whether the military rulers who took over when Mubarak stepped down are ready to submit to civilian oversight that could curb their power.

On Monday the generals approved legislation passed by the Islamist-led parliament to ban officials from the Mubarak regime from running in the presidential elections, a security official said.

Now the elections commission must rule if candidates such as Mubarak's last prime minister, Ahmed Shafiq, are allowed to stay in the race, since he applied to run for president before the law was approved.

Liberals and Islamists held one of the largest protests in months on Friday, accusing the country's military rulers of working behind the scenes to push a candidate to power who will protect their interests. Speaking during an army exercise on Monday, Egypt's military ruler Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi denied his council of generals is backing a presidential candidate.

"The next president will be the choice of the people without any imposition or guardianship from anyone," he said in remarks carried by the official state news agency MENA.

Under Mubarak, who ruled for nearly 30 years, international monitoring of local elections was viewed as meddling in Egypt's affairs. Legislative and presidential elections were rigged in favor of the deposed leader and his former ruling party.

The Carter Center is the most prominent of the eight groups denied permits. Some of the others are linked to U.S.-based churches.

Sanne van den Bergh, who heads The Carter Center in Egypt, said the group has not yet received formal notification of the decision to deny them a permit.

"At the moment we haven't been informed that we've been rejected," she said, adding that the center will decide on its next steps after notification.

She said the center applied for a permit in October.

Local civil society groups have complained that the Social Affairs Ministry delays processing permits for groups, forcing many to work in legal limbo.

Egypt's election commission said it is considering whether to allow international observers to witness the upcoming presidential vote. Local monitoring groups with licenses will be allowed, the commission said.

Egypt's military rulers allowed The Carter Center to have 40 people observe the multistage parliamentary elections that ran November to February. The government also allowed local groups to observe the elections, and had judges monitoring in polling stations throughout the country.

The Carter Center said the vote was generally fair.

Military rulers have come under criticism for going after rights groups and civil society organizations in recent months, specifically ones with American ties.

A recent investigation into alleged violations by U.S. democracy groups operating in Egypt led to the worst diplomatic row between Cairo and Washington in decades. American employees were accused of using illegally obtained funds to promote activities that undermined stability, and those Americans in the country were summoned to court.

The diplomatic row eventually cooled when they were allowed to leave Egypt after intense U.S. efforts and pressure. But the case against the NGOs is ongoing.