

Egyptian regime fears mass protests

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Discussion on the recent events in Tunisia can be heard in the streets of the Egyptian capital Cairo. In the course of demonstrations against the dictatorship of Ben Ali dozens of predominately young Tunisians have been killed by the Tunisian police and army. Anger over the brutality of the Ben Ali regime is widespread in the Egyptian capital.

“A government that kills its people, rather than creates jobs, has no right to exist”, declared Ahmed, as he wove his taxi through the overcrowded streets of Cairo. “The protesters are not terrorists, as the government claims. They are normal people like you and me who have taken to the streets because they have no perspective. They are fighting the same problems we have here in Egypt.”

Mohammed, a young student in a cafe in downtown Cairo, sees the situation similarly. “The situation in Tunisia is comparable to Egypt. In both countries there a dictator. The population is impoverished, there are no jobs and rising prices.” He then adds defiantly: “I hope the situation here explodes soon. Even if they shoot at us—as in Tunisia.”

When one follows the conversations in cafes and on the streets it is evident that the anger under the surface in Egyptian society mirrors that in Tunisia, heightening fears on the part of Arab and Western governments that the mass protests in Tunisia will spread across the entire region.

In recent days the Egyptian and international press has been full of commentaries reflecting concerns that the riots in Algeria and Tunisia could rapidly affect the entire Arab world.

An article in the *Financial Times*, headlined “Riots resonate for youth across the Arab World”, notes that the situation, especially for young people, is similar throughout the Middle and North Africa. “Soaring food prices, extensive joblessness and a widening gap between rich and poor are the main complaints”, the paper writes.

Aljazeera.net published a comment with the title “Middle East: Beware the Ides of March”, which “do not bode well” for the Arab world in 2011. “Political turmoil” has already affected many countries of the region, including Sudan, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Egypt, it notes. The author, Larbi Sadiki, a lecturer in Middle East politics at the University of Exeter, paints a picture of the Arab world in the new year marked by “unrest”, “nascent revolutions” and a rise in religious tensions and conflicts over who will succeed the aging rulers of Saudi Arabia or Egypt.

In particular there are huge fears that the insurgency could spread to Egypt. The country on the Nile is the main ally of US imperialism in the region, and with about 80 million

inhabitants—and the most populated (with a growth rate of 2 percent per year).

There is a numerically strong working class and masses of impoverished peasants who are struggling to survive in the countryside and who have migrated in large numbers to the capital, Cairo, in the hope of finding work as day laborers.

The prospects for young people in Egypt are no better than in Tunisia. Sixty percent of the population are under 30 years old and constitute nine-tenths of the country’s total unemployed. Following a series of structural “reforms” dictated by the International Monetary Fund, poverty in Egyptian society has reached crisis proportions. More than 40 percent of the population live on less than two dollars a day, and over 20 percent do not even have a dollar a day.

As is the case in Tunisia and Algeria, food prices are increasing rapidly in Egypt. Magda

Kandil, the director of the Egyptian Centre for Economic Studies, told the Egyptian independent daily newspaper *Daily News Egypt* that the price of bread and cereals had increased recently by about 20 percent. The rise in the prices of these staple foods in turn have a direct impact on many other products.

The Egyptian regime is clearly aware of the danger bound up with the price increases. As a concession the Egyptian Ministry of Agriculture has taken steps to import additional meat products from Kenya.

The *Financial Times* also reported that countries in the Middle East and Africa, including Egypt, are seeking access to fresh supplies of corn. A representative of the Egyptian trade ministry has said that Egypt has enough supplies to produce subsidized bread for the next four months, but the measures taken by the government are a testament to how tense the situation really is.

In the countries of the Arab world, which buy nearly a quarter of the cereals traded globally, the provision of subsidized bread is a key policy to prevent unrest. In Egypt hunger riots took place in 2008 due to huge price increases for food on world markets in the wake of the international financial and economic crisis.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations announced last week that food prices in December had reached a new high and would even surpass the record prices of 2008. A report in Reuters concluded that the latest price increases would hit Egypt, which imports more than 50 percent of food imports.

Another concern of the international allies of Hosni Mubarak’s regime is social destabilization arising from an escalation in religious tensions. Twenty-three people were killed in a devastating attack on a Coptic church in Alexandria on New Year’s Eve. In the following days a series of violent clashes

between Copts and Egyptian security forces took place.

This week witnessed a new attack on Coptic Christians. A Muslim police officer out of uniform is alleged to have shot dead a 71-year-old Copt on a train in the province of Minya. The man's wife and four other Christians were injured. Following the attack, hundreds of Copts gathered outside the hospital where the wounded were being treated and street battles took place with the police.

In addition to religious discrimination about 8 million Copts living in Egypt face increasing economic discrimination. The majority of Copts are impoverished and their protests are an expression of growing social tensions.

The fact that social tensions are reflected in increasing religious sectarianism is directly linked to the creeping process of "Islamization from above". Under President Anwar al-Sadat, the successor to Gamal Abdel-Nasser, Shariah law was reintroduced and the exiled leader of the Muslim Brotherhood allowed into the country. The aim was to combat leftist political forces which criticized Sadat for his economic liberalization and pro-Western policies.

Hosni Mubarak has ruled the country continuously since 1981 on the basis of emergency laws. He has stepped up the process of Islamization, for example, by permitting increasing numbers of religious programs in state television in an effort to divert from the nation's increasing social and political problems.

In recent days, the regime used the latest terror attacks to prepare for the threat of riots. Amin Rady, the chairman of the Committee for Defense and National Security, announced on Monday that the security forces were to be increased and that surveillance cameras would be installed on all main streets in Alexandria.

The Egyptian regime had already undertaken massive security operations against the people, the independent media and the official opposition during the parliamentary elections held late last year. In the end, almost all the seats were won by the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) in an election dominated by fraud and violence.

The government's aim is to exclude any opposition from parliament prior to the presidential elections later this year. At the last elections in 2005 the largest opposition group, the Muslim Brotherhood, won 20 percent of the votes. According to the organization's lawyer Abdel Moneim Abdel Maqsood, this time around more than 6,000 of its supporters had been arrested.

Against the backdrop of social and religious tensions and uncertainty over a successor to the aging and ailing Hosni Mubarak, the ruling NDP is wracked by an intra-party power struggle. The so-called Young Guard inside the NPD favor the president's son and ex-banker Gamal Mubarak in order to press ahead with economic liberalization and privatization, while the old guard and the military fear a loss of their traditional influence.

A number of media and political commentators have questioned whether the regime will be able to prevent an outbreak of open class struggle with its brutal methods of police violence and torture.

Desperately worried about the prospects of the US client state in the Arabian world, Amr Hamzawy, an analyst with the Carnegie Middle East Center, recently accused the Egyptian government of

a "lack of energy" in tackling such problems as social inequality, corruption and the lack of democratic rights. In an article in the *Washington Post*, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy Human Rights and Labor Michael Posner called on the Egyptian government to carry out reforms in order to "bolster citizens' confidence in their government."

According to a report in *Al Masry Al Youm*, the former chairman of the state National Council for Human Rights (NHCR), Ahmed Kamal Abul, called on Mubarak to carry out a "peaceful revolution in Egypt". He warned the president that there would be a "major threat to national security" should "this move" not be undertaken.

A number of bourgeois newspapers have already written off the Mubarak government. Writing in the *Guardian*, Osama Diab declares: "Resentment is expected to increase as long as this regime is in power—especially when the presidential elections begin later this year." In a commentary for the German *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, its correspondent for the Middle East, Tomas Avenarius, declared that after the terror attack in Alexandria, Egypt, the former anchor of stability in the region, was nothing less than a "farce".

The problem confronting those layers of the Egyptian bourgeoisie and their international backers, who are dissatisfied with Mubarak, is that there is no tangible alternative to his rule. As a further comment in the *Guardian* makes clear, the official opposition parties have virtually no social base in the population and recruit their supporters almost exclusively from the urban bourgeoisie and the big landowners.

The campaign earlier this year by the most popular Egyptian opposition politician, Mohammad el-Baradei, with his "Platform for change" also failed to win any broad popular response. And, despite its ability to occasionally mobilize support, the Muslim Brotherhood is also a conservative movement with its roots in the upper middle class.

In Egypt there is only a tiny trade union presence, which is incapable of defusing or controlling mass protests on behalf of the bourgeoisie. Amr Choubaki, a researcher at the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo, told the newspaper *Al Masry Al Youm*: "Trade unions are dead in Egypt. There is no official organization which represents the people and the workers."

It is precisely the prospect of an independent movement of workers and peasants that currently fuels the fears of all the official political forces in Egypt and internationally.



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