

Egyptian government deploys police, shuts down Internet ahead of mass demonstrations

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28 January 2011

The mass protests in Egypt that began on January 25 are continuing, despite threats from the government and violent suppression by Egyptian police forces. A major demonstration is planned for today, following the traditional Friday prayer.

Another three deaths have been reported in addition to the three casualties on Tuesday, and the interior ministry confirmed that police forces have made over 1,000 arrests.

There are signs that the government is preparing further mass repression. Special operations forces have been deployed in the capital, Cairo. The Associated Press reported, "The counter-terror force, rarely seen on the streets, took up positions in strategic locations, including central Tahrir Square, site of the biggest demonstrations this week." Internet service has been shut down, including access to Facebook, Twitter and BlackBerry, in an effort to block communication within Egypt and with the outside world.

Opposition organizations and figures, including Mohamed El-Baradei and the Muslim Brotherhood, have sought to belatedly participate in these demonstrations in an attempt to control them and derail the movement against unemployment, poverty and government repression. Police forces on Thursday carried out preemptive arrests of Brotherhood leaders and others involved in the demonstrations.

Following the biggest protests in Egypt since the bread riots in 1977, the Egyptian Interior Ministry has proscribed all demonstrations. Despite the massive police presence, including heavily armed anti-riot units, demonstrations continued on Wednesday and Thursday. The police have beat and used tear gas against protesters, who defended themselves by hurling stones.

On Wednesday afternoon lawyers from the national lawyers' association rushed from their headquarters in downtown Cairo, broke through a wall of riot police and spilled onto the street. They threw rocks and bricks at police who were beating a demonstrator. As the clashes intensified, people climbed down from their apartments and passersby joined in to demand the "abdication of Mubarak," a reference to the Egyptian president.

At the foot of the steps of the lawyers' building, hundreds of riot police cordoned off the demonstrators who were joined by more protesters. At around 4 p.m., explosions rang out as police raised their batons and fired rounds of tear gas, sending people scattering.

Renewed protests were also reported in the city of Suez, east of Cairo, on Wednesday. Demonstrators gathered outside the morgue where one of the city's three victims of Tuesday's protest was lying in rest. Police broke up the crowd with tear gas, rubber bullets and live ammunition fired into the air. Later demonstrators attacked a police station and the headquarters of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). At least 55 people were hurt in the clashes.

On Thursday, there were clashes in Cairo and other cities. There were reports of fire exchanged with police in Suez, as well as conflicts between police and Bedouin protesters in Sheikh Zuwayid, near the Egyptian border with Gaza. In western Egypt, near the border city of Sallum, demonstrators blocked the main road between Libya and Egypt.

The government of Hosni Mubarak has made clear it will clamp down hard on protesters. It knows it has the full backing of the US State Department.

On Thursday, President Barack Obama issued his first public statements on the conflict. He cynically called for an end to violence on all sides, under conditions in which the Egyptian regime, backed to the hilt with American money, is brutally beating and arresting peaceful protesters.

Also on Thursday, White House spokesman Robert Gibbs reiterated earlier comments from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that the Mubarak government is "stable"—a clear sign that the US continues to back its long-time ally.

Egypt is America's most important Arab state ally in the region and receives the most funding from the US after Israel. The US government has provided an estimated \$1.3 billion in military aid per year since Mubarak took power in 1981 and has delivered more than \$28 billion in other forms of funding since 1975. Documents recently released by WikiLeaks make clear that the Egyptian government slavishly backs US imperialism on all major policy issues—including oppression of the Palestinians, co-operation with Israel, and preparation for aggression against Iran.

The dramatic implications for US foreign policy should Egypt follow the path of Tunisia were spelled out this week to the *Financial Times* by Aaron David Miller, a former US Middle East diplomat now at the Woodrow Wilson Centre: "It's one thing when this happens in Tunisia, a marginal Arab state," he said, "but

you're now talking about one of the two or three pillars of American security in the region being confronted with the ripple effects of the wave."

Washington has given the green light for the Mubarak government to proceed with the brutal suppression of the current protests, but there is growing concern in western circles that the tens of thousands of demonstrators, including many students, could be joined in the next days by the millions of poor workers from the suburbs of Egypt's main cities.

Should the police military tactics of the Mubarak regime fail, a second front is being prepared in order to preserve bourgeois rule in Egypt.

El-Baradei and the Muslim Brotherhood have both announced they will take part in today's protest. Their aim is to bring the mass demonstrations—which they initially opposed—under control.

El-Baradei, founder of the National Alliance for Change, returned to Egypt on Thursday from his home in Austria, declaring that he had "no other choice" than to take part in the mobilizations. He told reporters that he was returning to "make sure that things will be managed in a peaceful way."

El-Baradei is positioning himself to play a leading role in a so-called "Alternative Parliament", bringing together all of the main bourgeois opposition movements in Egypt. The explicit aim of this parliament, contained in its founding declaration, is to prevent independent mass protests. The group's document warned of "an explosion of the masses" should the government fail to carry out reforms.

In an interview with the newspaper *Al Masry Al Youm* at the end of last year, El-Baradei expressed his support for an alliance of all the supposedly opposition parties in Egypt: "I hope in the next phase we will have a united opposition, the NAC, the Al-Wafd party, the [Muslim] Brotherhood, the Gabha [The Democratic Front party]—we need everyone. And of course we need to link the young people with the labor unions and the elite with the young people."

Prior to returning to Egypt, El-Baradei, who has very limited support inside Egypt but is feted by the Western press, re-emphasized his readiness to work alongside the Muslim Brotherhood. El-Baradei stressed that he and the Brotherhood shared many of the same political aims. "They are a religiously conservative group, no question about it, but they also represent about 20 percent of the Egyptian people," he said. "And how can you exclude 20 percent of the Egyptian people?"

For their part, the Muslim Brotherhood have made clear they are quite ready to work with El-Baradei. Noting the absence of the organization's banners or slogans on Tuesday's demonstrations, Gamal Nassar, a media adviser for the Brotherhood, denied government claims that the organization had anything to do with the violent clashes that took place. "People took part in the protests in a spontaneous way, and there is no way to tell who belonged to what," Nassar said, adding that the Brotherhood was only one part of El-Baradei's umbrella group.

Another spokesman for the Brotherhood revealed the fears of the organization that the protests could escalate and constitute a genuine threat to the Mubarak government. "We hope that the

government meets the demands of the demonstrators," Essam al-Erian declared.

Al Sayed Al Badawy, chairman of Al-Wafd, held a press conference on Wednesday to call for political reforms to "meet the demands of the Egyptian population." Al-Wafd has proposed a "national salvation government," the aim of which would be to reestablish order and prevent the realization of the demands of the protesters.

Another component of the attempt to smother any independent movement of the masses is the country's state-controlled trade union movement. The chairman of the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), Hussein Mogawer, has called on all trade union presidents "to prevent workers from participating in all demonstrations at this time."

On Wednesday the ETUF, which is in the pocket of the ruling NDP, went so far as to issue a statement congratulating the Egyptian Ministry of Interior on the occasion of the national holiday for the police on Tuesday.

According to *Al Masry Al Youm*, Mogawer has instructed his officials to inform him round the clock of any moves or attempts by workers to join the protests.

A trap is being prepared for the Egyptian masses. Workers and youth should adopt a stance of uncompromising hostility towards the belated intervention by El-Baradei, the Muslim Brotherhood and other bourgeois organizations in Friday's demonstration. These forces are intent on strangling a genuinely independent movement in order to defend capitalism and the subordination of the country to the dictates of American imperialism, which has presided over so much misery.

To carry forward the struggle, a new revolutionary leadership must be built, one that works to unify the Egyptian working class with the working class and oppressed masses of the entire region on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective. This is the perspective of the world Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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