

Hundreds of thousands across Egypt defy police attacks to demand ouster of Mubarak

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Anti-government demonstrators in Cairo, Suez, Alexandria and other cities across Egypt overwhelmed huge contingents of riot police on Friday, seizing police stations, surrounding government offices and burning down headquarters of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) in an explosive movement that rocked the 30-year-old US-backed dictatorship of President Hosni Mubarak.

The regime had deployed police on bridges, streets and roads, shut down the metro and cut off Internet and cell phone service in an attempt to block workers and youth from massing in Cairo and other cities. Uniformed police and plainclothes officers attacked and arrested reporters in an effort to keep reportage of the day's events from reaching the general public in Egypt, the broader Middle East and the rest of the world. The only internet provider left functioning was Noor Data Networks, which connects the Egyptian stock exchange to the rest of the world's money markets.

But with the end of Friday prayers, people swarmed out of the mosques and onto the streets in cities and towns across the country. The police used tear gas, water cannon, rubber bullets and truncheons to intimidate and disperse the crowds, but to no avail. The Egyptian Interior Ministry gave the order for riot police to use live ammunition against demonstrators.

Varying reports put the toll of dead from police violence at between 13 and 20, and many hundreds were estimated to have been injured, some with bullet wounds. However, under conditions of a virtual communications lockdown in most of the country, it is likely that the real toll of fatalities and injuries is far higher.

It is not known how many people have been arrested, but the figure is estimated to be in the high hundreds.

The police could not stop demonstrators from burning down the NDP headquarters in Cairo. In Suez, protesters occupied the police headquarters and seized weapons. Similar events were reported in other cities.

A group of demonstrators encircled Cairo's luxury Hilton Hotel. Guests were forced to retreat to the balconies in an attempt to escape the clouds of tear gas. For large parts of the day the centre of Cairo and other major cities such as Alexandria and Suez resembled battlefields.

In the course of the skirmishes, the leader of the opposition National Association for Change, Mohamed ElBaradei, was ordered by police not to leave a mosque near downtown Cairo where he was attending Friday prayers. ElBaradei, the former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, flew to Egypt from his home in Vienna for the express purpose of heading off a revolutionary movement and offering his services for a "peaceful" transition to a new bourgeois government.

Other cities across the country reported huge turnouts by demonstrators. Nearly 40,000 protesters stormed the headquarters of the ruling party in Mansurya, and 15,000 took to the streets to protest in Luxor in southern Egypt.

In Alexandria, protesters often outnumbered the police. Some officers were seized and beaten with their own batons. Protesters set fire to police vehicles.

Some of the fiercest fighting was reported in Suez, where 15,000 riot police were out in force using tear gas to disperse crowds. Tanks were deployed on the streets of the city after darkness fell.

Some 80,000 reportedly demonstrated in Port Said, at the mouth of the Suez Canal. Riot police also confronted protesters in Ismailia, Fayoum and Shbin

Elkoum.

There were scattered reports of police officers tearing off their uniforms and joining the throngs demanding the ouster of Mubarak.

When in the late afternoon crowds threatened to occupy the Foreign Ministry and the Information Ministry in Cairo, Egyptian state television announced that Mubarak had declared a curfew in Cairo and other major cities and ordered the army onto the streets.

In Cairo, at least, it appears that the army refrained from directly attacking the demonstrators, and there were reports of clashes between the army and the police. The regime, no doubt at the urging of Washington, is seeking to encourage illusions that the army is either neutral or the protector of the people in the hope that the immediate threat of revolution can be contained and better conditions created for violently crushing the uprising.

At about midnight Egyptian time, with many thousands continuing to protest in the capital and elsewhere, Mubarak finally took to the airwaves to address the nation. He arrogantly declared that he would enforce security, made hollow promises to address the people's economic and political grievances, and announced that he was sacking the current government and would appoint a new one. The bottom line was his rejection of demands that he resign.

This only further enraged the protesters, whose numbers swelled following Mubarak's address.

Some 60 minutes later, President Barack Obama made a brief televised statement essentially backing Mubarak, while hypocritically claiming US support for human rights and urging the Egyptian government to refrain from violence against the protests. Obama spoke of the United States' "partnership" with the "government and people" of Egypt, ignoring the government's record of bloody repression, culminating in the mass violence on Friday, and the deep-seated desire of the people to finally rid itself of such a "partner."

Obama declared US support for human rights in Egypt the same day that WikiLeaks released State Department cables documenting US knowledge of and complicity in the regime's use of torture and assassination against political opponents.

The intervention of the army in Egypt represents a turning point in the upsurge of the working masses in a

series of Arab countries, including Tunisia, Algeria, Yemen and Jordan. For the first time in recent history, an Arab regime has mobilized its military forces on a large scale to intervene against political protests.

There can be no doubt that the intervention of the Egyptian army was discussed and approved by Washington. At a press conference on Friday, White House press spokesman Robert Gibbs confirmed that the Pentagon was in constant touch with the Egyptian military high command.

Anti-government protests also took place Friday in Jordan. An estimated 1,500 protesters amassed in downtown Amman and hundreds of others marched in other cities, according to reports. Syria is also reported to have suspended Internet services Friday in order to prevent the spread of information of the uprising in Egypt.

Demonstrators in Egypt vowed to take to the streets once again on Saturday.



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