

Mass protests continue in defiance of Egypt's government and military

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Protests involving hundreds and thousands continued in Cairo, Alexandria, Port Said, Suez and other cities throughout Egypt on Sunday.

Workers and young people defied the curfew imposed by the military and rejected with contempt Hosni Mubarak's efforts to portray a new cabinet as a step towards greater democracy. Saturday's appointment of Omar Suleiman, the director of the Egyptian General Intelligence Directorate (EGID), as vice president was seen as particularly provocative.

"Hosni Mubarak, Omar Suleiman, both of you are agents of the Americans," protesters chanted. "Mubarak, Mubarak, the plane awaits!"

Several prisons across the country have been attacked. Thousands of prisoners reportedly escaped from four jails. They included 34 leaders from the opposition Muslim Brotherhood, freed from the Wadi Natroun jail.

Tens of thousands flocked to the Tahrir Square. Clashes between demonstrators and police have left at least 150 people dead and thousands more wounded. The death toll is likely far higher—given the paucity of reporting from smaller towns and cities.

In Alexandria, where the antigovernment protests began, the police were unable to maintain the curfew in the face of sustained opposition. Large-scale protests erupted after the funerals of victims of the police.

The military has been exposed as the major force for the suppression of the uprising in Egypt. Widely portrayed by the leadership of the opposition as the army "of the people", for the first five days of the movement demanding an end to Mubarak's 30-year rule, the 450,000-strong conscript army took a back seat to the police and security services. But with police stations being torched and officers killed, police were withdrawn completely and replaced by the army.

From then on the media was filled with reports of looting, due to the absence of the police. As well as private houses in the richer areas and some stores, looters broke into Cairo's Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, tearing the heads from two mummies and damaging other objects.

This looting was used by the army to urge demonstrators to abide by the curfew and unite with them in maintaining "order". "The armed forces urged all citizens to abide by the curfew precisely and said it would deal with violators strictly and firmly," state television urged.

But there is widespread evidence that the looters were generally

criminals released and then directed by the state, or were in fact undercover police.

Many thugs reportedly carried government-issued weapons. The *Telegraph* wrote that one group of looters captured in the upmarket Cairo district of Heliopolis turned out to have ID cards identifying them as members of the security forces. Residents in Nasr City reported that when they captured looters, "they said that the Ministry of Interior has sent them." Protesters also caught two police informants attempting to rob a bank in Alexandria.

By Sunday, the army was deployed in massive numbers. Air Force jets and a helicopter flew low over Tahrir Square, and tanks and armoured vehicles were everywhere. Roads and bridges were barricaded and key government institutions guarded. A column of tanks arrived there only to have its path blocked by defiant protesters.

The military has also been deployed to the resort town of Sharm el Sheikh.

The government also announced on Sunday that it was revoking *Al Jazeera's* licence to broadcast and will be shutting down its bureau office in Cairo. Later Sunday it was announced that police would be back on patrol today. Police would return to traffic, criminal and other work but would not be sent in to confront protesters, according to Reuters. More ominous still, Mubarak has reportedly given the military the authority to shoot to kill when it sees fit.

The appointment of Suleiman demonstrates how much Mubarak relies on the military to stay in power. It also indicates the very real possibility of a military takeover, under the guise of ensuring a "smooth transition" to elections.

Suleiman is a key player in Egypt's alliance with the United States. He has been directly involved in policing the Palestinian masses and participating in the CIA "rendition" program. He has long been the military's favoured choice to replace Mubarak, who wanted his son, Gamal, to take the presidency.

Any ouster of Mubarak would initially mean Suleiman becoming president, at least until fresh elections. But that might not be the end of things. The same day as the Suleiman appointment, former air force commander, Ahmed Shafiq, was named by Mubarak as the prime minister.

Mubarak and his cronies spent most of Sunday cloistered in meetings with the military. First the interior minister, Habib al Adli, met with Suleiman and Defence Minister Mohamed Hussein Tantawi. Mubarak himself held talks with Suleiman, Tantawi,

Chief of Staff Sami al-Anan and other senior commanders.

Footage of these meeting was then broadcast by state television in an effort to demonstrate that Mubarak has the backing of the generals. Western diplomats said they saw no sign the military was prepared to ditch the president.

Anti-US chants are a major feature of all the protest in Egypt because of the key role Washington has played in backing Mubarak. Egypt is the second largest recipient of US aid in the Middle East, receiving \$1.5 billion a year, used to purchase F-4 jet aircraft, F-16 jet fighters, armoured personnel carriers and Apache helicopters now being used to intimidate protesters.

The Egyptian military may be the kingmaker in Cairo, but behind the scenes the military's response is being discussed and formulated in collusion with Washington. On Friday, top Egyptian military officials were forced to cut short their visit to the Pentagon, attending the annual US-Egypt Military Cooperation Committee meetings, and return to Cairo. The next day Suleiman and Shafiq were appointed by Mubarak.

The US has made clear that it is not yet ready to see Mubarak go. If he proves to be a liability, however, everything will be done to safeguard the Egyptian state as a key regional ally of the United States.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spent yesterday appearing on five US news and talk shows to call for an "orderly transition" of power in Egypt.

Refusing to either condemn or support Mubarak, she stressed that the US "wants to see an orderly transition...so that no one fills a void, that there not be a void, that there be a well thought-out plan that will bring about a democratic participatory government."

"Increasing chaos or violence in the streets" was "not the way to go," she added.

Asked directly if she thought Mubarak had taken the necessary steps to hold on to power, she told Fox, "It's not a question of who retains power... It's how are we going to respond to the legitimate needs and grievances expressed by the Egyptian people and chart a new path."

Clinton cited positively Mubarak's role in maintaining Egypt's peace treaty with Israel and in supporting Washington's "war on terror"—i.e., its efforts to expand its control over the Middle East. "There is no easy answer," she concluded.

Scotching statements to the contrary, Clinton said there was "no discussion as of this time about cutting off any aid" to Egypt.

An "orderly transition" at this point means opposing efforts to bring down Mubarak on the streets. The favoured option appears to be support for Suleiman or some military figure to head a transition government. But that implies two things: an ability to head off and demobilise the protests and the cultivation of some form of political modus vivendi with the opposition parties.

On both scores, the US would be forced to rely on the Muslim Brotherhood—despite its long-term animosity to Islamist groups.

The Brotherhood has made clear that it is amenable to some form of accommodation with a pro-US regime. It has stayed in the background during the protests and has indicated that it will not run a candidate in any presidential elections. Instead, it would support the former head of the United Nations nuclear watchdog, Mohamed ElBaradei, as a secular transitional leader for Egypt.

The Brotherhood works with ElBaradei, who is far more acceptable to Washington, in his National Association for Change. It has endorsed ElBaradei as a potential negotiator with the government.

In an interview with France 24, the Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, Mohammed Badie, called for Mubarak, not to step down, but to form a government of national unity. This government would then organize free elections and Mubarak would leave office. "He must form a new government of national unity, organize elections under the control of the judiciary. Finally, Hosni Mubarak must leave," Badie said.

He urged the army to be a "shield for the Egyptian people and the entire Arab World."

ElBaradei addressed tens of thousands of protesters last night, predicting change "within the next few days".

He said he wanted to negotiate a new government with the army, which he described as "part of the Egyptian people", even as military helicopters and F-16 fighters circled overhead. Such rhetoric disarms the workers, youth and oppressed as to the very real dangers posed by the army, which may yet decide to take the road of direct repression of the protesters.

At the center of the revolutionary upheavals is Egypt is the immense and growing social crisis that has affected millions of people throughout the region.

The *Financial Times* noted Saturday, "The incredible scenes of the last few days have proved that there is always a tipping point." As Egypt's population has grown, "so has the gap between the haves and have-nots, with the rates of absolute poverty increasing from 16.7 per cent to 19.6 per cent between 2000 and 2005, according to World Bank figures.

"In recent years, an economic team within government has implemented reforms that have been lauded by the business community and lured in record foreign investment flows. Yet as the economy returned impressive numbers, the frustrations, or as one government minister put it 'the pain,' of the vast majority of Egyptians intensified.

"As the cost of their basic goods soared, the wealth of the tiny elite became more conspicuous with luxury goods filling the shelves of new malls. Gated compounds hosting palatial villas and lush green grounds sprang up on Cairo's outskirts, opulent islands of sanctuary from the pollution and chaos of the capital."

Two days earlier, the *Times* cited an Israeli official who aptly summarised the attitude of the ruling elites to any call for democratic reform: "When tsarist Russia went through a revolution, there was a democratic moment, and we all know how that ended."



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