

Deadly crackdown against Egyptian protesters

Patrick O'Connor
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Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak yesterday mobilised thousands of pro-regime thugs, provocateurs and plain clothes police against demonstrators demanding an end to his dictatorship. At least five people were killed, though the final death toll will likely be significantly higher, and hundreds more were injured, many seriously.

The calculated provocation was facilitated by the military, which allowed the violent attacks to proceed throughout the day. Pro-Mubarak forces were effectively escorted by the army into central Cairo's Tahrir Square, the focal point for anti-regime protests, just hours after military leaders issued a statement demanding that demonstrators desist and "restore normal life." The violence is aimed at intimidating and dividing the revolutionary forces in Egypt and creating the conditions for the military to more directly intervene.

Senior commanders have signalled their support for Mubarak's plan to stay in power until September. This would allow ample time for military and intelligence personnel, working hand in glove with their American counterparts, to prepare a rigged ballot to anoint Vice President Omar Suleiman or another "safe pair of hands" as Mubarak's successor.

The Obama administration is fully complicit in Mubarak's bloody counter offensive. There is no doubt that the White House was consulted before yesterday's events and issued the green light.

There was nothing spontaneous about the pro-Mubarak attack. Many public sector workers were reportedly instructed to join in. CNN reporters were told by workers from the national petrochemical company that they had been ordered onto the streets. Some who joined the mob were bussed into Cairo from the countryside. Others in the capital were paid, with the *New York Times* reporting that people were offered 50 Egyptian pounds (about \$8.50) to carry pro-Mubarak placards.

Several reports noted the willing participation of some of Cairo's ultra-wealthy elite. An Associated Press dispatch from the "upper-class neighbourhood of Mohandiseen" described how "men in designer sunglasses and women with expensive hairdos joined government employees, including a few dozen nurses in white dresses and stockings who jumped and chanted, 'We love you Mubarak!'"

Egypt's hated police force had barely been seen on the streets

for the last week—but yesterday re-emerged in force. Some were in uniform and hailed as heroes by the pro-Mubarak thugs, while many others remained in plain clothes. Several were captured with their police identification cards by anti-government demonstrators. Journalist Reham Saeed reported seeing men in police uniforms entering hotels near Tahrir Square and coming out in civilian clothes.

Several pro-government mobile phone messages were sent en masse, including one early yesterday which called on "Egypt lovers" to gather at Tahrir Square. The *Guardian* also noted: "Egyptian state TV reported that foreigners were caught distributing anti-Mubarak leaflets, apparently trying to depict the movement as foreign-instigated."

According to CNN, a state television broadcast added: "Let the military take over and protect you and Egypt... We have confirmed reports that there are radical elements heading to cause internal strife. They have balls of fire and they want to start fire in the Tahrir Square."

The Egyptian media also highlighted a statement issued by the foreign ministry saying that demands for rapid political change from "foreign parties" were intended "to incite the internal situation in Egypt."

In an apparent attempt to present the image of a nation returned to normality, the regime lifted its shut down of the Internet and reduced its declared curfew from 5 p.m. to 7 a.m. instead of 3 p.m. to 8 a.m.

On state television, a military spokesman asked of anti-Mubarak protestors: "Can we walk safely down the street? Can we go back to work regularly? Can we go out into the streets with our children to schools and universities? Can we open our stores, factories and clubs? It is time to go back to normal life. You have the power to allow Egypt to return to normal life... Your message was received and we know your demands."

Immediately after this, the news broadcast reportedly ran a scrolling message reading: "The armed forces call on the protesters to go home for the sake of bringing back stability."

Soon after, at about 2 p.m., thousands of men armed with knives, molotov cocktails, stones, bats and other weapons surged into Tahrir Square, where they outnumbered the protesters who stayed on the streets after the mass demonstration and general strike on Tuesday. Pitched battles

erupted after the peaceful anti-Mubarak protestors came under attack and attempted to defend themselves. At one point, pro-government goons charged through the demonstrators on horses and camels.

Guardian journalist Mustafa Khalili, who was injured when a rock struck him on the head, described the scene at one of several makeshift medical centres set up around Tahrir Square: “There must have been more than 50 injuries, some of them horrific. I saw one guy whose left eye was bleeding, men with broken arms, broken teeth where they had just been hit in the face by rocks.”

Other serious clashes were reported outside the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, and in Alexandria, where similarly calculated provocations were organised by the Mubarak regime. Several journalists were targeted by the thugs. Anderson Cooper and two of his colleagues from CNN were assaulted, as were two Associated Press correspondents. A Belgian reporter was beaten, detained and accused of spying.

Late yesterday evening, Egypt time, Vice President Suleiman added his voice to the military’s demand for an end to the demonstrations. He made his offer of “dialogue” with the opposition parties conditional on an end to the anti-Mubarak movement in the streets.

Pro-government forces have continued their attack on demonstrators in Tahrir Square overnight and, according to some reports, are firing live ammunition into the crowd. The live blog maintained by Al Jazeera reported at 1:47 a.m., local time: “Dozens of Mubarak supporters have erected barricades on either side of a road [just off Tahrir Square], trapping anti-government protesters. They are also gathering stones, breaking streetlights and putting on balaclavas, covering their faces, apparently in preparation for a fresh stand off with anti-government protesters. Sources tell our correspondent that the men preparing for the stand off are police officers.”

At 3:15 a.m. the blog reported: “Anti-government protesters are collecting rocks at a couple of the entrances to Tahrir Square in preparation for an attack. One of our web producers reports that almost everyone in the square seems injured, is bandaged and limping.”

The military continues to stand by while anti-Mubarak demonstrators come under vicious assault. Their complicity underscores the duplicitous and criminal role of all those political forces in Egypt that have striven to sow illusions among workers and young people in the military.

Mohamed ElBaradei and the Muslim Brotherhood were among those hailing the armed forces as the “protector of the nation” and friend of the anti-regime uprising. Even as the anti-Mubarak forces were being savagely attacked under the military’s supervision, ElBaradei yesterday issued a pathetic appeal to the army to “intervene decisively to stop this massacre.”

The latest developments demonstrate the burning necessity for the working class to develop its own independent leadership

and form new democratic organisations of struggle, including armed defence guards to protect strikers and demonstrators from Mubarak’s thugs.

It is no accident that violent and repressive measures are being unleashed against the demonstrators at the same time as the working class is beginning to play a more prominent role in the anti-Mubarak movement. The *Los Angeles Times* yesterday reported from the industrial city of Suez, where at least 30 people have already been killed.

“Years of repressed hatred over police corruption, beatings and intimidation have turned the city into a storm, gusting, turning strangely quiet and gusting again,” the newspaper stated. “Many of the rich have fled, the workers have taken to the streets, the poor hurry to market before curfew.”

Reporters spoke with Kamal Banna, a striking chemical factory worker, who said, “The government kept us poor. We didn’t talk about politics because we were trying too hard to survive. Then we started talking about politics and they started killing us. There’s no way back for us now. Mubarak has to leave. If the police come back, they’ll want revenge.”

For ElBaradei, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the rest of the bourgeois opposition, the aim is to engineer a reshuffle of bourgeois rule, in close collaboration with Washington, while leaving intact all the central components of the repressive state apparatus, including the military.

Workers and young people, on the other hand, can satisfy none of their democratic aspirations and demands for decent jobs, wages, working conditions and access to public education and other basic social services within the framework of the profit system and the existing institutions of the Egyptian bourgeois state. The task for the working class is to mobilise independently, winning to its side the rural masses and urban lower middle classes through a revolutionary struggle for a workers’ government based on a socialist and internationalist program.



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