

Heroic resistance in Cairo to state-orchestrated repression

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Anti-government protesters in Cairo have fought back heroically against the brutal attacks by the disguised police and paid thugs of the regime of President Hosni Mubarak.

Early Thursday, protesters said they had detained 120 police and Mubarak loyalists and broadcast pictures of security police ID cards they had confiscated from infiltrators, routinely referred to by the media as “pro-Mubarak demonstrators”.

The army, just as cynically portrayed by the media as “standing between” the rival camps, let the attacks of Mubarak’s henchmen proceed for hours on end. They only made a brief feint at stopping clashes—just at the point where the pro-government forces were getting the worst of things.

Since then, snipers have been allowed to shoot from surrounding buildings unopposed, with many demonstrators wounded and several killed. Machine gun fire has been directed against the protesters. Meanwhile, no attempt was made to arrest petrol bombers. Brutal beatings were given the go-ahead throughout the city.

The death total has now reached 13, according to media reports, including one foreigner who was beaten to death, and at least 1,200 have been injured. There are certainly many more casualties that have gone unreported.

Many of these attacks have been carried out openly by uniformed police. In addition, Mubarak’s thugs have been handing people over to the police and secret service to be beaten and detained. A video posted on YouTube shows a police van ploughing into anti-regime protesters.

US intelligence web site Stratfor yesterday highlighted a report in the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Mesryoon* claiming: “Leaders from Egypt’s ruling party, members of the People’s Assembly and security commanders attended a secret meeting in Alexandria on Feb. 2 and made plans to mobilize hundreds of ‘thugs’ to attack demonstrators and disperse them by force... According to sources that attended the meeting, a number of People’s Assembly members offered 250,000 Egyptian pounds (\$42,700) to finance the attack, while security officials offered hundreds of clubs and explosive devices for use against the demonstrators.”

Political and human rights activists have been targeted, with reports of dozens of arrests. An Amnesty International representative and someone from Human Rights Watch were among eight to 12 arrested and beaten in a raid on the Hisham Mubarak Law Centre, which is an affiliate of Oxfam. The Centre for Economic and Social Rights was also raided.

The blogger “Sandmonkey” was grabbed while seeking to bring medical supplies to Tahrir Square. His car and mobile phone were destroyed and he and those with him were beaten. He has since been released.

The international media has been subjected to a well-organized attack both by unidentified thugs and uniformed police. Thugs have reportedly stormed hotels looking for journalists and stealing their equipment.

In one of the worst incidents, an ABC News crew’s car was hijacked and its passengers threatened with beheading. Several journalists have been beaten up. The Egyptian interior ministry arrested more than 20 foreign journalists in Cairo—including the *Washington Post*’s bureau chief. BBC equipment was seized and some of its journalists detained. Reuters and Al-Jazeera were also victims. Swedish TV’s Bert Sundström was feared missing at one point, but was found receiving treatment for serious stab wounds. A Greek reporter was also stabbed in central Cairo.

The *Guardian* reported that in Alexandria, pro-Mubarak thugs accused journalists of being Israeli spies, after state television “had warned viewers to beware of Israeli agents masquerading as journalists and seeking to damage the country’s image and national interest”.

Al Jazeera has been especially targeted by the government and its provocateurs. Its Cairo office has been shut down by authorities, and several of its reporters detained.

The patent aim of this campaign is to black out coverage of the brutal violence being unleashed by the regime on what had been largely peaceful demonstrations.

The army did nothing to prevent any of this. Its supposed efforts at “protection” and keeping the two sides apart in practice meant preventing doctors and medical supplies reaching those they had trapped.

The BBC’s John Simpson, attempting to lend credibility to the army, suggested that it was “significant” that two tank turrets were turned towards pro-Mubarak forces. Of more significance is that until that point all tank turrets were trained on the protesters in Tahrir Square.

A significant piece of direct evidence of collusion is the texts sent out by the government via various mobile phone networks to rally its forces. One published on Flickr gallery states, “The Armed Forces asks Egypt’s honest and loyal men to confront the traitors and criminals and protect our people and honor our

precious Egypt.”

The fact is that the army and the police are headed by the same people who control the government, with Mubarak's newly appointed vice-president, Omar Suleiman, acting as the prime culprit.

Initially, Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq gave an interview in which he apologised for violence he described as “a fatal error”. “When investigations reveal who is behind this crime and who allowed it to happen, I promise they will be held accountable and will be punished for what they did,” he said.

Hours later Suleiman gave his own televised interview. On the eve of “departure Friday”, the vice-president was far more bellicose. Describing Mubarak as “father and leader”, he blamed violence on the anti-government protesters, in particular those amongst them representing “foreign agendas.” “We will look into [the violence], into the fact it was a conspiracy,” he said.

Those in Tahrir Square were “representatives of certain political parties, including foreigners”. Those calling for Mubarak to step down were not “part of the Egyptian culture”. It was a “call for chaos.” “September is a time limit which must be observed, otherwise we will have a constitutional vacuum,” Suleiman said.

Mubarak would not depart, Suleiman said. He would remain in office until elections, in which neither he nor his son, Gemal, would stand. Of the protesters, he threatened, “End your sit-in. Your demands have been answered.”

The police, he said, had done a “great job.”

In answer to statements from Mubarak's imperialist allies calling for a quick transfer of rule, Suleiman said, “I blame some friendly countries for saying the wrong things.”

This would have “a negative impact on our relations with them... I blame certain friendly states who are hosting unfriendly TV stations who charge the youth against the state.”

Instead, he said, a “national dialogue” with representatives of opposition movements, including the Muslim Brotherhood, would discuss a timetable for political reform. But there would be no substantive talks unless protesters went home.

The inclusion of a promise that Gemal would not stand for president is in the army's own interests. The generals who now dominate the government have shouldered out some of the businessmen cultivated by Mubarak, of whom Gemal is only an example made yet more odious by the nepotism involved. These same generals-cum-politicians also control major business interests that they want to protect and extend at the expense of both the masses and their civilian rivals.

Suleiman's hard-line stance is in stark contrast to that of the leaders of the opposition National Coalition for Change, which includes Mohamed ElBaradei, the Muslim Brotherhood, Kefaya and others. A spokesman said that there will be “no negotiations with the government before Mubarak goes,” but added, “After that, we're ready for dialogue with Suleiman.”

Mubarak himself felt emboldened to do a self-serving interview with ABC's Christiane Amanpour. Amid statements expressing unhappiness at seeing Egyptians “fighting each other,” and stressing his determination to stay on for the good of the country, he was asked “how he responded to the United States' veiled calls for him to step aside sooner rather than later.”

Mubarak stated that he had simply told President Barack Obama, “You don't understand the Egyptian culture and what would happen if I step down now.”

Alongside the violent repression they have suffered, the Egyptian people were forced to listen to the hypocritical protestations of Washington and Europe.

Obama offered a brief prayer for Egypt at a National Prayer Breakfast, for the violence to end and that “a better day will dawn over Egypt and throughout the world.”

In a joint statement, the leaders of France, Germany, Britain, Italy and Spain called for the political transition in Egypt to “start now”, while condemning “all those who use or encourage violence”—as if both sides were guilty.

Neither Washington, nor its European counterparts offered anything else but platitudes. A UK government spokesman told the BBC that sanctions against Egypt “are not on the table” and “We won't get into the position of dictating to other countries who their leader should be.”

German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle stated baldly that “it's completely obvious that this is a matter for the political opinion makers in Egypt to decide for themselves who shapes the democratic transition and how.”

With its own journalists arrested and under attack, US State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley tailored his response to the Egyptian governments lies and evasions. Whereas this offensive appeared to be part of an organised effort, it was unclear who was directing it, he claimed.

The overriding concern of the Obama administration is to buy time, force the protesters off the street, and allow the Egyptian state and military to organize a new regime that is equally undemocratic and committed to supporting US interests in the region. On Thursday, administration officials floated to the media a plan to have Suleiman, a longtime close contact of the US and Israel, take over operations of the government before September, with the support of the military.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton urged Egypt's “government and a broad and credible representation of Egypt's opposition, civil society and political factions to begin immediately serious negotiations on a peaceful and orderly transition”.

This is deliberately mendacious. Suleiman's public pronouncements—coming after days of vicious repression—are a clear signal of an even bloodier clampdown to come.



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