

Massive anti-government protest on Egypt's "day of departure"

Chris Marsden
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Friday's "day of departure" was a massive display of opposition to the Mubarak regime. Over a million took to the streets of Cairo, with hundreds of thousands flooding Tahrir Square, defying government thugs, military cordons and ignoring the curfew.

After two days of state-orchestrated attacks that left at least ten dead and close to a thousand injured, the demonstrators were well organised. Those arriving brought food and medical supplies to those permanently camped in the square. Medicines were distributed at makeshift hospitals. Designated security personnel searched those arriving for evidence of them being infiltrators.

The Tahrir demonstration was peaceful, but elsewhere in Cairo protesters engaged in clashes with pro-Mubarak goons. The worst skirmishes were in surrounding streets and nearby Talaat Harb Square. Gunshots were fired. People battled with iron rods.

CNN reported success for the demonstrators: "After hours of skirmishes, the rebels had advanced east, erecting barricades and checkpoints around the imposing 19th century stone buildings that line the roundabout in Talaat Harb Square. By 7 p.m., the opposition activists had also seized streets running several blocks deeper into the city from Talaat Harb."

Angry demands for President Hosni Mubarak to step down were coupled with calls for his regime to go too. Chants reflected the understanding that Mubarak is only in power thanks to Washington. "Condoleezza, Condoleezza, go get Mubarak a visa," was one. "Hillary, Hillary, take Mubarak to the distillery," was another.

In the second city of Alexandria, UK's Channel 4's Lindsey Hilsum reported "hundreds of thousands" on the streets. "Anti-govt protestors still streaming past our window in Alexandria and I can't see an end to the demo," she wrote. Al-Jazeera reported Christians forming a security cordon around Muslims kneeling for Friday prayers. With armed police seeking to keep reporters out, a secret policeman was seen being dragged away by protesters, beaten up and driven away in a car. Tanks and troops were everywhere.

More than 100,000 protesters gathered in Damanhour, 100 miles northwest of Cairo and more than 100,000 in Mansoura.

Tens of thousands gathered in Suez.

Though the military and the police made no overt move in Tahrir, the state continues to move against its opponents, civil rights activists and journalists.

Hamish Macdonald from Ten Network Australia reported, "Just got detained by military behind Egypt TV building. Captives there cable tied and being tasered."

Rosa Navarro, an American who was arrested and detained overnight at Intelligence HQ, reported that she was "left blindfolded and sitting with around 50 or 60 other Westerners who had been picked up while waiting for a bus, or a taxi or just walking on the street."

The *Guardian's* Peter Beaumont and Jack Shenker were interrogated by the Egyptian army and threatened by "machete-wielding vigilantes." A security force accompanied by a "gang of thugs" stormed the office of the Muslim Brotherhood's web site.

About 5,000 people have been injured in the past 10 days, Egypt's health minister told the Al-Arabiya network. Jamal Moheb, a doctor who has been treating the injured, said of Thursday's events, "We have firearms injuries. 6mm and 9mm bullets were used. The people here still have bullets in their bodies."

The United States and the European Union are increasingly worried that Mubarak's regime is in danger of losing control. Washington was reported by the *New York Times* to have been in intensive discussions urging Mubarak to step down. But President Barack Obama, speaking alongside the Canadian Prime Minister, performed verbal gymnastics in order to avoid making such a call. There needed to be an "orderly transition" process "that starts now".

Asked whether Mubarak should go, Obama said he had told him that "going back to the old days is not going to work... the only thing that will work is moving an orderly transition process."

The reported US proposal is a purely cosmetic measure, designed to save Mubarak's regime from popular anger. The US reportedly suggested that Vice President Omar Suleiman should take over an interim regime, heading a three-man command that would possibly include a representative of the opposition acceptable to the US. Suleiman is head of Egypt's

intelligence and security apparatus. It is his underlings who are now terrorising, beating and murdering opponents of the regime. A “transitional” government headed by him would be a thinly-disguised military junta—a continuation of what exists today and which millions want to see the back of.

If the protesters demobilised on the basis of the installation of such a regime, then Suleiman would simply launch a clampdown—arresting those identified as leaders, brutalising thousands more and killing or “disappearing” those it feared most. That is how it would prepare for a presidential election.

A revealing glimpse into the nature of Washington’s discussions with the Egyptians was provided by the head of the US military, Admiral Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Interviewed on “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart,” he said, “One of my chief goals right now it to make sure we keep the lines of communications open, I have talked to my counterpart a couple of times. And also that we’ve got our military ready, should any kind of response or support be required.”

There could not be a clearer pledge of US aid in the event that a clampdown in Egypt is considered necessary.

The European Council, a summit meeting of European Union leaders, called on Egyptian authorities in the vaguest terms for “political reform, not repression... All parties should show restraint and avoid further violence and begin an orderly transition to a broad-based government.... The European Council underlined that this transition process must start now.”

There was again no call for Mubarak to go and there is no agreement on such a call. British Prime Minister David Cameron, taking his cue from the harder stance being taken by Washington, stated that the Egyptian government has failed to meet the “aspirations” of its people for a “credible” transition. But Italy’s Silvio Berlusconi praised Mubarak and said he should remain in office until elections are held in September. “I hope that in Egypt there can be a transition toward a more democratic system without a break from President Mubarak, who in the West, above all in the United States, is considered the wisest of men and a precise reference point,” he said.

Lady Ashton, a Labour peer and the EU’s foreign policy chief, was interviewed by Al-Jazeera. She claimed that “what seems to be happening” is that Mubarak “is moving towards some kind of national dialogue”.

Asked whether Mubarak should step down now, she said: “It is for the Egyptian people and government to move forward together.” There needed to be a “plan in place”—something she had discussed with Suleiman.

Washington’s efforts to persuade Mubarak to give way to Suleiman have for the moment been thwarted by the hard-line stance of the Egyptian government. Suleiman insisted Thursday that Mubarak would remain in office. Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq stated, “I don’t think that a president after 30 years... after all these years of public service... these five months are not going to make much difference.” Finance Minister Ahmed

Abdul Gheit declared that “outside forces cannot dictate the transition of power” and that Mubarak will stay on for now. The leader of Mubarak’s National Democratic Party, Dr. Ibrahim Kemal, denounced such calls as a betrayal and a conspiracy against the Egyptian people.

Mubarak’s cronies are not motivated by personal loyalty. They fear that if Mubarak falls, this will only lead the masses of workers and youth to demand their heads as well.

Those supposedly in the leadership of the opposition movement are no less fearful of the “chaos” Mubarak warned might follow his departure. But they are offering their services in stabilising the situation under any post-Mubarak regime. The West’s favourite, Mohamed ElBaradei, told reporters there should be a year-long transition to democracy under a temporary constitution—with a presidential council of several people, including a military representative. He has denied reports that he would not stand for president.

Amr Moussa, the Arab League’s secretary-general, is another figure suggested by the media as someone with whom the government could negotiate as a representative of the “opposition”. Yesterday was in fact Moussa’s first appearance on the anti-government demonstrations. He has said that he expects Mubarak to remain in office until his term ends in September. It would be impossible to organise new elections quickly, he added. Asked whether he would consider a role in a transitional government and run for the presidency, he replied, “Why say no?”

The Muslim Brotherhood has been forced to step up its oppositional rhetoric, but is at pains to reassure the military regime and Washington that it does not represent a threat. The Brotherhood has said it would not field a presidential candidate, or seek ministers in a new cabinet.



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