

Egyptian protesters face mounting violence and repression

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8 February 2011

Thousands of demonstrators remained camped in Cairo's central Tahrir Square Monday night, defying threats of violence and a wave of arrests by the secret police of the Mubarak dictatorship.

Some demonstrators lay down under the tracks of army tanks that surround the square, in an effort to block any forward movement. A large group of demonstrators blockaded the Mogamma complex of government offices that adjoins the square, preventing an effort by the authorities to reopen it.

The Egyptian military intensified the pressure on the anti-Mubarak demonstrators, attempting to push the protesters into a smaller area in the square, while temporarily blocking delivery of food supplies.

The blockade was abandoned only after a sit-down protest began on the street near Qasr Al Nil bridge, with dozens of sympathizers who were bringing food to the demonstrators waving bags of food in the air. As the *Washington Post* reported the incident: "The crowd at this secondary protest grew until it numbered several hundred angry, chanting people. Similar scenes were enacted at other entrances to the square, threatening to spread the unrest outward into the city. After an hour, with no explanation, the army relented, and food was again allowed in."

Contrary to the Obama administration's claims that a process of negotiation is under way that will produce a peaceful political transition, all indications are that the Mubarak dictatorship is using the talks as a smokescreen while it prepares a military onslaught on Tahrir Square.

Tensions are rising in advance of further mass protests planned for later in the week. There is a visible buildup of the military, with tanks pointing their gun barrels towards the protesters' campground, and rolls of barbed wire and sandbagged checkpoints on side streets.

"Army units have increased their presence in and around Tahrir Square, parking tanks on every street," the

Guardian reported. "Military officials have gradually imposed obstacles—more checkpoints, more coils of razor wire, limitations on television cameras—and urged demonstrators to go home."

New evidence of the savagery of the military regime's repression is coming to light every day. Human Rights Watch issued a report Monday documenting that some 300 people have been killed during the two weeks of antigovernment protests. The report was based on visits to seven hospitals in Cairo, Alexandria and Suez and interviews with doctors and morgue workers.

Most of the victims were killed by gunfire, the vast majority in Cairo during the first week of the protests, with 217 killed from January 25 through January 30, and 15 more on February 2-3, when pro-regime thugs attacked the crowds in Tahrir Square. There were 52 deaths documented in Alexandria and 13 in the industrial city of Suez.

The actual death toll is undoubtedly far higher, given that protests have broken out all over the country and the HRW report included only three cities. A UN human rights official has estimated a death toll of more than 300 just in the first week of protests. Egypt's own Health Ministry reported that at least 5,000 people were injured on a single day, Friday, February 4.

The Al Jazeera television network obtained and broadcast several videos of savage violence carried out by police and pro-regime thugs last week, during two days of attacks on the demonstrators in central Cairo, carried out February 2-3.

The Egyptian Organization for Human Rights estimates that at least 1,275 people have been detained by police since the protests began. Most were seized and later released, in some cases after beatings and other forms of torture. However, there is a growing list of missing or "disappeared."

The crackdown on foreign journalists continues—an

effort to reduce the number of witnesses for the planned bloody settlement of scores with the most militant students, workers and other demonstrators camped out in Tahrir Square. Two Al Jazeera correspondents were detained Sunday, including the Cairo bureau chief for Al Jazeera English, Ayman Mohyeldin, a US citizen. Mohyeldin was released Sunday night. He described hearing other detainees being beaten by soldiers.

Egyptian journalists are being rounded up as well, but few details are available, because most of these remain imprisoned and cannot tell their stories. Raids continue on human rights groups as well.

The widespread public sympathy for the oppositional movement continues to find reflection even among the most privileged layers of the Egyptian media. The leading news anchorwoman for state television quit her job Monday, declaring she could no longer continue dispensing official propaganda.

At the same time, the military dictatorship, in close alliance with the United States, is continuing its political maneuvers with sections of the bourgeois opposition, after several hours of talks on Sunday conducted by Vice President Omar Suleiman with a delegation that included representatives of the long outlawed Muslim Brotherhood. The aim of these discussions is to buy time to prepare a more definitive crackdown on protesters, while a “transitional” government is put in place equally as dedicated as Mubarak to defending the interests of the US and the Egyptian ruling class.

The decision by the Muslim Brotherhood to drop its longstanding precondition for talks—the resignation of Mubarak—was a major capitulation to the regime, and drew widespread criticism from demonstrators.

Three top leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood held a press conference where they attempted to justify their climbdown. Mohammed Saad El-Katatni, a member of the group’s Guidance Council, said, “We wanted the president to step down but for now we accept this arrangement. It’s safer that the president stays until he makes these amendments to speed things up because of the constitutional powers he holds.”

What exactly is “safer”? Certainly not the lives of those who are heroically defying the threat of a bloodbath in Tahrir Square. It is the “safety” of bourgeois property that concerns all the representatives of the Egyptian elite of businessmen, landlords and military bureaucrats.

This declaration reveals the class position of the bourgeois opposition groups, whether Islamist or secular: in the final analysis, they regard the military and Mubarak

himself as a guarantor of their property interests against an uncontrolled revolutionary explosion from below.

At a formal meeting of his cabinet Monday, President Hosni Mubarak approved a 15 percent pay raise for public sector workers, as well as an increase in pensions. These measures are intended both to cement the loyalty of the security forces, the principal support of his regime, and to throw a sop to the mounting working-class opposition.

The enormous social polarization in Egypt, the driving force of the revolutionary upheaval, was underscored by the publication the same day, in the opposition newspaper *Al-Masry al-Youm*, of estimates of the personal wealth of a group of former government ministers and Mubarak cronies. These include:

- Ahmed Ezz, a steel magnate, and former Organization Secretary of the ruling party: \$3 billion
- Former Housing Minister Ahmed al-Maghriby: \$1.8 billion
- Former Tourism Minister Zuhair Garrana: \$2.2 billion
- Former Minister of Trade and Industry Rashid Mohamed Rashid: \$2 billion
- Former Interior Minister Habib al-Adly: \$1.3 billion

These corrupt officials can be named in the press because the Mubarak regime is now prepared to sacrifice them to appease public opinion. Their assets have been frozen, three of them have been denied permission to leave the country, and formal corruption charges are being readied.

Even greater—but unreported by either the Egyptian or the Western press—are the assets accumulated by the Mubarak family and those cronies who are still being protected. Meanwhile the average Egyptian worker takes home barely \$10 a day, according to government statistics.



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