

Egyptian military asserts authority as strikes, protests spread

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The Egyptian military moved to assume power after the collapse of the longtime dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak, issuing a decree that puts the Armed Forces Supreme Council—all officers chosen by Mubarak—in control of the government, while promising new presidential and parliamentary elections within six months.

While dismantling some of the most discredited elements of the dictatorship—suspending the constitution and dissolving the parliament chosen in rigged elections last fall—the military council maintained the state of emergency that has been the basis for political repression and authoritarian rule for the past 30 years. It also maintained the curfew, although cutting it from ten hours a night to six hours.

The military also took its first step towards reasserting physical control over the capital city, attempting to clear Cairo's Tahrir Square of demonstrators, an action that brought several thousand protesters back into the streets.

The decree, dubbed "Communiqué 5," confirms the cabinet appointed by Mubarak only two weeks ago to run the government until elections. Ahmad Shafiq, the Air Force general named prime minister by Mubarak in January, will remain in his post. He told a news conference, "There is no change in form, or method, or the process of work. Matters are stable completely."

The Armed Forces Supreme Council will issue laws during the interim period and appoint a committee charged with amending the constitution and determining the rules for the holding of a popular referendum on proposed amendments.

The head of the military council, Field Marshal Mohammed Hussein Tantawi, better known from WikiLeaks cables as "Mubarak's poodle," is de facto head of state and represents Egypt in its relations with foreign countries.

Making clear its commitment to defending the interests of US imperialism and Israel, on Saturday the military stated that it would honor all of Egypt's international treaties and agreements, continuing the foreign policy of the Mubarak regime.

Palestinian protesters in Gaza had rejoiced at news of the downfall of Mubarak, who is blamed for aiding Israel's brutalization of the population by sealing Egypt's border crossing with Gaza. The military cabal in Cairo has made it clear they will continue to enforce the suffering of the Palestinians.

While the massive crowds that packed Tahrir Square largely disbanded over the weekend, several hundred protesters remain camped there. On Sunday morning, military personnel armed with batons attempted to push them out by taking down their tents, but news reports indicate that hundreds refused to leave, expressing skepticism about the army's intentions to act as the caretaker of the revolution.

The crowd swelled again later in the day when protestors sent out messages over loudspeaker, cell phone, and social media about the military's crackdown on demonstrators. According to news reports, several thousand returned to Tahrir Square upon hearing the news.

"The soldiers told us to go. They removed our tents but we will stay. We want another government. We need civilian government. They want to steal our revolution," Adel el-Ghendy, a 54-year-old building contractor, told the *Guardian*.

Skirmishes broke out between the two sides, with at least 30 people arrested. The British newspaper noted that those seized were "taken to a military compound at the nearby Egyptian museum where detained protesters have previously been beaten and interrogated."

"We don't want to leave," Mohammed Shaheen told the *Los Angeles Times*. "They'll never give up the emergency laws. And they'll use them to put people in jail," he warned.

Another demonstrator, 36-year-old computer engineer Ahmed Abed Ghafur, told the *Washington Post*: "This is a revolution, not a half-revolution. We need a timetable for elections. We need an interim government. We need a committee for a new constitution. Once we get all that, then we can leave the square."

Tensions escalated rapidly when several thousand police officers, demonstrating near the Ministry of Interior to demand pay raises and improvements in working conditions, marched into Tahrir Square. The police are widely despised by the population for their brutality, and were quickly confronted by the demonstrators.

The police appealed for military support, shouting, "The police and the army are one." Military personnel fired shots into the air and sprayed smoke upon the crowd to force them to disperse, to little avail. Eventually, the police left the area.

There is a sharp dichotomy in the response to the departure of Mubarak and the military takeover. The bourgeois parties and would-be leaders generally declared victory and urged the population to disperse and allow the transition to go forward under military control. The masses of working people and youth have seen the overthrow of the longtime dictator as a signal to press forward with their own demands for jobs, pay increases, better working conditions, the ouster of hated and corrupt officials, and greater democratic rights.

The Muslim Brotherhood, the country's main Islamist movement, which initially came out against the anti-Mubarak uprising, has welcomed the military's assumption of power, commending it for its behavior and winning "the trust" of the people.

Mohamed ElBaradei, former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency who returned to Egypt after a multi-decade hiatus, urged protesters to follow the military's orders and "go home."

He was echoed by Ayman Nour, the former presidential candidate of the liberal Al Ghad Party. Nour called the military's actions "a victory for the revolution," adding: "I think this will satisfy the protesters."

Some representatives from the youth groups most active in the protests have told the press that they welcome Communiqué 5 as an indication that the army intends to meet protesters demands, which include new elections. While they continue to press for the release of political prisoners, as well as an end to the emergency law, they express illusions in the intentions of the military.

According to press reports, however, other youth associated with the April 6 Movement and the Popular Democratic Movement for Change refused to leave Tahrir Square.

The mass movement that brought down Mubarak is continuing to spread, with new strikes and protests breaking out over the weekend.

Public employees at Egypt's national bank staged protests Sunday demanding higher wages and an end to corruption and nepotism. Thousands gathered outside bank buildings in Cairo, which were shuttered in an effort to prevent employees inside from joining forces with those outside. Crowds swelled over the course the day, forcing the government to declare Monday and Tuesday to be national bank holidays. Banking employees faced off with military personnel, who formed cordons around banks in Cairo.

Protesters chanted, "Leave! Leave! Leave!" demanding the ouster of the bank's head. Late in the day, Chairman Tarek Amer sent out an email to employees on Sunday stating that he submitted his resignation, although it is not known whether it was accepted.

There are indications that the strike is spreading to other institutions, including the Bank of Alexandria and state-owned insurance agencies. At an insurance agency not far from Tahrir Square, Reuters reports speaking to one woman among a crowd of hundreds:

"I have been working for five years in the company," Hala Fawzi told the news service. "Finally we have been encouraged to come out and speak." The 34-year-old mother of two is paid 100 Egyptian

pounds (\$20) a month, one quarter the wage of a public school teacher.

On the Sinai Peninsula, 700 workers employed by a company that provides services to the multinational peacekeeping force in the region staged a sit-in. Massing outside the force's headquarters in Sharm El-Sheikh and El Gorah, the employees demanded higher wages. In the Sinai town of Arish, 300 workers at hospitals and mining sites struck to demand permanent jobs and medical insurance.

As of Sunday, strikes by railway personnel and steel workers are continuing.

Employees at the Misr Spinning and Weaving factory in Mahalla, the largest textile operation in the country, suspended their strike action over the weekend, but indicated they would continue pressing their economic demands. "We have stopped striking for now, but we will continue to demand a raise in the minimum wage," strike organizer Faisal Naousha told the AFP.

In a sharp warning to the working class, an army official told Reuters this weekend that the Armed Forces Supreme Council intends to "ban meetings by labour unions or professional syndicates, effectively forbidding strikes." The military will not tolerate a return to "chaos and disorder," he said.

Since taking power, the army has urged the population to cease protesting and go back to work. The military, which is deeply integrated into Egypt's ruling class and business elite, is hostile to popular demands for wage increases, improved living conditions and measures to address widespread joblessness.

Making clear that the government would refuse to raise wages in the public sector, Prime Minister Shafiq said on Egyptian television this weekend, "We need to be practical. It's very difficult to respond to the demands of all the government employees. The government will do everything it can do." But, he insisted, it would move gradually so as not "to make big promises and then fail to deliver."



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