

The Egyptian working class needs new forms of mass organization

Chris Marsden
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With his announcement that he will not step down and intends to serve out his term until September, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has thrown down the gauntlet before the millions opposing his regime.

Mubarak could not hold onto power without the support of substantial sections of the military and his paymasters in Washington, DC. The Obama administration has been in constant contact with the Egyptian high command, which it funds to the tune of \$1.5 billion a year.

Mubarak's promise not to contest the next election is meaningless. Its only purpose is to provide Washington and the Egyptian military with the necessary time to disorient, disperse and repress the mass opposition to the regime. During the past 24 hours, even as tens of thousands of protesters occupied Tahrir Square, Mubarak, the military and their US advisors have been huddled in intense strategy sessions on how to formulate a political response to the outpouring of opposition that will ensure the survival of the regime.

Initial reports spoke of Mohamed ElBaradei, a man with no substantial support in Egypt, being in discussions with former intelligence chief and newly named Vice President Omar Suleiman and representatives of various opposition parties. The aim of the discussions was reportedly to establish a "board of trustees" made up of Suleiman; Sami Anan, the chief-of-staff of the armed forces; ElBaradei himself and Ahmed Zewail, a Nobel chemistry prize winner. It now appears that this course of action has been rejected, with the US fearing that ditching Mubarak too quickly would create a power vacuum.

Mubarak's defiant stand underscores the reactionary and two-faced role that has been played by the military. Its pledge "not to resort to the use of force against our great people," presented as a sign that it stands behind the protests, is nothing of the sort. The military remains in charge of the country. Tahrir Square is still surrounded by tanks and troops.

Egypt's rulers have depended directly on the military and drawn their leaders from its ranks ever since Muhammad Naguib and Gamal Abdel Nasser led the Free Officers Movement in overthrowing King Farouk in 1952. Mubarak emerged from the army to become president in 1981 following the assassination of Muhammad Anwar El Sadat.

The army remains Mubarak's power base. His initial effort to secure his rule in the face of the protests that erupted last week involved appointing a cabinet even more openly dominated by the military. He named Suleiman, a former general, as vice president, Ahmed Shafiq, former air force commander, as prime minister, Defence Minister General Mohamed Hussein Tantawi as deputy prime minister, and General Mahmoud Wagdy as interior minister.

This is what is really meant by the army's declaration that it is "keen to assume its responsibility in protecting the nation and the citizens."

Time magazine said of Suleiman: "Finding himself at the fulcrum of a fast-changing power equation could put the intelligence chief turned vice president in a strong position to script the denouement of the rebellion."

The *Guardian's* Simon Tisdall was clearer still, noting that the Egyptian regime's "survival plan" centres on Suleiman: "At this point, Suleiman is the most powerful man in Egypt, backed by the military (from whence he hails), the security apparatus and a frightened ruling elite hoping to salvage something from the wreckage.

"Suleiman is, in effect, heading a military junta at this point, with all the principal civilian power positions—the presidency, the vice-presidency, the premiership, the defence and interior ministries—held by former senior officers, and with the military itself in full support."

The claim by the Muslim Brotherhood that the army is "the protector of the nation" is false to the core. The army is the protector of the capitalist class.

The role of the Brotherhood is to politically disarm the working masses. Presently its propaganda lends credence to the political manoeuvres aimed at preserving the monopoly of power and wealth enjoyed by the ruling elite. Ultimately, however, should real change be posed, bloody experiences such as Chile in 1973 and Tiananmen Square in 1989 show that the army hailed by the Brotherhood will act ruthlessly to preserve the existing social order.

The Egyptian capitalist state is in crisis, but it remains intact and is working to regain full control. The mass movement has yet to develop the necessary organizational forms and political leadership.

The Mubarak regime, resting on the military and retaining the backing of US imperialism, seeks to exploit this limitation. The critical task confronting the working class is the creation of popular centres of power, independent of the government, the military apparatus and those “oppositional” forces now seeking an accommodation with the old regime.

The International Committee of the Fourth International calls the attention of Egyptian workers to the experiences of the greatest revolutionary movement of the twentieth century—that which unfolded in Russia between 1905 and 1917. In 1905, workers’ councils, known as soviets, sprang up in Saint Petersburg and throughout Russia’s industrial regions as organs of struggle against the Tsarist regime. In 1917, soviets again emerged, uniting workers and rebellious soldiers recruited from the peasantry. The soviets became the basis of revolutionary struggle and the overthrow of the bourgeois government.

This must serve as an example for the next stage in the development of the revolution now unfolding in Egypt. Mass organisations must be created that can become mechanisms for establishing the power of the workers and oppressed.

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