

Egyptian prime minister resigns on eve of mass protest

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Egyptian Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq resigned yesterday in an effort to avert a Million-Man March, scheduled for today by protesters demanding change and critical of his long history of service to former President Hosni Mubarak.

Shafiq, a former Commander of the Egyptian Air Force (like Mubarak himself) and Minister for Civil Aviation, was named Prime Minister on January 29 by Mubarak, in an effort to defuse the growing mass movement against the dictatorship. The population refused to accept the nomination as a real political change, however, and continued with protests and a powerful wave of strikes that ultimately forced Mubarak from power on February 11.

In meetings with youth groups and protest organizers, Shafiq made no effort to hide his contempt for the basic demands driving the mass struggles in Egypt: political freedom, higher wages and living standards, and an end to official corruption. He mocked protesters in meetings, offering to “give them candy” if they left Tahrir Square. He also defended Egypt’s State Security Force against accusations about its use of torture.

Gaby Osman, a young protester at Tahrir Square, told the *New York Times*: “Ahmed Shafiq and Hosni Mubarak are working together. He became prime minister because of Hosni Mubarak, and we hear rumors that he calls Mubarak on the phone and asks him what he should do to look like he is doing something for the people.”

In recent days protesters had begun moving back to Tahrir Square—the central plaza that protesters held against Mubarak’s thugs in order to force him from power—setting up tents amid preparations for protests today against Shafiq. There were calls for protests to continue after today until the collapse of the Shafiq

government.

Yesterday, Egypt’s ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, the de facto military dictatorship that took control of the Egyptian state after Mubarak’s ouster, announced on Facebook that it had accepted Shafiq’s resignation. It said it had entrusted former Transportation Minister Essam Sharaf with forming a new Cabinet.

Shafiq then announced his resignation in a brief speech at the Council of Ministers, acknowledging that he could not continue in the face of mass opposition. State officials then left the Council in silence, refusing to take any questions from reporters.

Sharaf, the new prime minister, studied civil engineering at Purdue University in the United States and is a member of Mubarak’s National Democratic Party (NDP). After resigning in protest at corruption in the transportation ministry in December 2005, he took a position teaching at Cairo University. He was also a member of the NDP’s Policies Committee.

Sharaf joined the anti-Mubarak protests on February 8, shortly before Mubarak’s ouster, and is one of the NDP leaders closer to certain opposition parties. He has acquired a reputation as a critic of Mubarak’s policies on public infrastructure, and of his close ties with Israel.

Asked to describe what reforms he might carry out as prime minister, however, Sharaf suggested only a limited re-branding of the existing regime, changing the name of the State Security Force to State Safety Force. He also proposed remodeling Tahrir Square to make it look more like London’s Hyde Park.

There are widespread popular demands for the dissolution of state security forces, due to their brutal attacks on protesters during the anti-Mubarak protests. This was the subject of an official government fact-

finding committee report, released yesterday.

The report found that police snipers shot protesters from the tops of buildings around Tahrir Square—including the Mugamma, Ramses Hilton hotel, American University of Cairo, and the Interior Ministry. Two former senior policemen testified that policemen would not shoot protesters without permission from the government.

The committee also took evidence from 120 eyewitnesses who said that police shot protesters with live ammunition in Cairo and in Giza. Eyewitnesses also reported that it was pro-Mubarak thugs, not protesters, who set NDP headquarters on fire. The committee also reported that it had seen video evidence of two armored police vehicles shooting demonstrators or trying to run them over.

Many protesters told the press that they would continue with today's protest despite Shafiq's removal from office, noting that their demands went beyond changing the identity of the prime minister. One told the *Washington Post*, "They want tomorrow and future protests to stop. But we are still planning the protest tomorrow. Tomorrow's protest was not just for Shafiq."

Official or semi-official "opposition" parties of various political colorations are attempting to use Sharaf's installation to wind down the protests and sow illusions that he will carry out social change from above. Former UN official Mohammad ElBaradei thanked the military in a brief Twitter message for putting Sharaf in place.

Ayman Nour of the liberal Al-Ghad party praised Sharaf's installation by the military as a "good step," expecting that he might sack other ministers and reorganize the security forces. Nationalist Al-Karama party leader Hamdeen Sabbahy praised Sharaf, saying that he "represented the Egyptian revolution and not Mubarak."

The Muslim Brotherhood told the German press agency DPA it would "wait and see" before passing judgment on him.

In fact, as an official serving on the sufferance of the army, Sharaf will have as his main task the defense of the interests of the officer corps—that is, policies to re-establish order and the interests of Egypt's business elite, of which the army brass is an integral part.

One of the key questions being debated in the

government is the reopening of Egypt's stock exchange. This was again delayed from its scheduled date on Sunday, March 6, to an unspecified date to be determined by Sharaf. The exchange has been closed since January 27, over fears that it would crash due to investors' fears that profit margins would be hit as workers mount strike struggles for better wages and living conditions.

Any attempt to create the best possible conditions for the market's re-opening—i.e., to create the best possible conditions for the exploitation of the workers—will bring Sharaf's government into headlong confrontation with the revolutionary demands of the Egyptian masses.

A further indication of the close relation between the army leadership and Egyptian capitalism is the immense personal fortune amassed by Mubarak. Despite formally living on an army salary of under \$10,000 per year, Mubarak amassed a fortune measured in tens of billions of dollars. He reportedly has at least \$7 billion in accounts in London, Cyprus, and Geneva.

A Cairo criminal court will begin investigating Mubarak's fortune on March 5. On Monday, Prosecutor General Abdel Meguib Mahmoud ordered Mubarak's funds seized and banned him and his family from traveling.

A considerable period of time has elapsed since Mubarak was forced from office, however, and there are reports that he has already fled the country. According to some sources he is still at his mansion in the resort town of Sharm El-Sheikh.

Egypt's *Al-Akbar* newspaper reported, however, that Mubarak is being treated for pancreatic and colon cancer in Tabouk, Saudi Arabia. There are other reports that Mubarak's wife Suzanne Sabet and his sons Alaa and Gamal attempted to flee Egypt through Sharm El-Sheikh airport last Sunday.



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