

Egyptian military storm peaceful protest in Tahrir Square

Our correspondent
12 April 2011

The mood in Tahrir Square has never been so hostile towards the military. “Mubarak was overthrown almost two months ago, but he’s still free”, said Ahmed, a student at Helwan University during the mass protests in Cairo last Friday.

“Strikes and protests are banned by law. The new government is just as subservient to the United States and Israel as the old one”, Ahmed continued. “The military are trying to kill off the revolution, but the revolution will go on.” His words would be dramatically confirmed just a few hours later.

Late on Friday night, the Egyptian military attacked hundreds of peaceful protesters who had remained in Tahrir Square to demonstrate in support of the revolution. They were attacked brutally with armoured vehicles, batons, tasers and live ammunition, causing deaths and injuries. When the attack happened, whole families were staying on Tahrir Square, sleeping in tents.

The next morning, women searched desperately for their children who had disappeared during the massacre. Several dozen people, including children and young people, were arrested by military police and taken away. Like many others detained in recent weeks, they are to be put before military tribunals.

The brutal violence is the response of the military to the largest nationwide protests since February 18, when the country celebrated the overthrow of dictator Hosni Mubarak. On Tahrir Square in Cairo, around a million people gathered. In the Mediterranean city of Alexandria, more than 100,000 took to the streets, and large demonstrations took place in other cities.

In the past week, a new strike wave has rolled across the country, giving the revolution new impetus after the mass protests last week. In Suez, thousands of canal workers are on strike, and there are rumblings in the centres of the textile industry. On Tuesday, in Shibin el Kom, the capital of the province of Menoufiya in the Nile Delta, hundreds of textile workers from the Shibin El Kom Textile Company gathered to demonstrate against mass sackings and corruption.

The workers from Shibin El Kom were supported by workers from El Mahalla Kubra, another industrial centre in the Nile Delta, where there had been massive strikes and street battles with security forces in 2008. Together, the workers marched from the factory to the government building in the province of Menoufiya to lend force to their demands. The Egyptian daily *Al Ahram* reported that workers chanted slogans against the regime as well.

The workers were confronted with a massive military presence.

An officer threatened to shoot with live ammunition if the protest did not stop immediately. YouTube videos show how soldiers on tanks provocatively loaded machine guns in front of the protesting workers. However, the workers were not intimidated and decided to continue their protest on Friday at Tahrir Square. Their demands include a minimum wage of 1,200 Egyptian pounds (€140), a cap on salaries, the dissolution of the state trade union federation and the re-nationalisation of privatised factories.

The focus of the protests on Friday, called the “day of cleansing”, was the call for an immediate settling of accounts with the representatives of the old regime. The Supreme Military Council, which has ruled the country since the fall of the Mubarak regime, has so far only arrested a few of Mubarak’s henchmen responsible for plundering the country, terrorising the Egyptian people, and the deaths of more than 800 people during the revolution.

The protesters’ anger is directed primarily against the generals on the Supreme Military Council. One young demonstrator said in an interview with the WWS: “The generals on the military council are Mubarak’s generals; it is no wonder they are not holding their old friends to account. They do not represent the interests of the revolution, but their own. That is why I am here today. Our demand was, and remains, the downfall of the regime.”

Tens of thousands in Tahrir Square expressed their growing hostility to the military, chanting: “The people want the overthrow of the field marshal” and “the people want to overthrow the regime”. Other chants were directed against Israel and the recent deadly attacks on Palestinians by the Israeli military. Later in the day, some of the demonstrators marched to the Israeli Embassy in Giza and demanded an immediate end to all economic and political relations between Egypt and Israel.

In the afternoon, several young officers joined the protesters on Tahrir Square. They were enthusiastically greeted by the crowd. They said they agreed with all the demands of the revolution and stressed: “We will stay here until the field marshal is overthrown and Mubarak is prosecuted.” They said they had no fear of possible consequences. The Supreme Military Council has threatened all those who participate in demonstrations while wearing their uniform with being placed before a military court.

An eyewitness told the WWS one officer had paid for his courageous conduct during the attacks with his life, and six others were also killed. The others were arrested and taken away in a military vehicle. Official sources say there were three dead and 70

injured.

According to an eyewitness, most of those killed were hit by live ammunition, fired directly at demonstrators by the military and security forces. As evidence, he pointed to a bullet hole at chest height in railings on the edge of Tahrir Square. The bullet was still stuck in the railings, which had probably saved someone's life.

The military massacre of peaceful protesters and soldiers defecting show that the Supreme Military Council and the new government defend the interests of the Egyptian ruling class and imperialism with the same means as the deposed dictator Mubarak. Prime Minister Essam Sharaf was formerly a member of Mubarak's NDP party.

The brutality of the army comes at a time when all the internal and external political issues of the revolution are breaking open again.

In economic terms, nothing has changed since the overthrow of Mubarak. Workers are still being exploited for starvation wages, and the vast majority of young people are unemployed. From the beginning, the new rulers have made it clear that they are not prepared to make even the slightest changes. On March 14, the Ministry of Finance published a statement that read: "The new government under Prime Minister Dr. Essam Sharaf is determined not to reverse all the economic and fiscal reforms."

These "reforms" are the brutal liberalisation of the Egyptian economy on terms dictated by the International Monetary Fund. Under Mubarak, the Egyptian elite have sold off state enterprises, lifted all restrictions on foreign capital and cut taxes for the rich. These neo-liberal economic policies have led to the impoverishment of millions of Egyptian workers and were ultimately the main cause of the revolution. In consultation with international financial capital, the new government wants to continue and strengthen this policy even more. Workers who are opposed to this must reckon with brutal violence.

Nor has there been a change in the role of the Egyptian regime as a stooge of imperialism in the region. All external contracts and "commitments" are being maintained, including the supply of gas to Israel and the peace treaty with the Zionist state. The border with the Gaza Strip remains sealed off; Palestinian refugees are not allowed to enter Egypt.

In recent weeks, many high-ranking representatives of the United States, including Hillary Clinton and former presidential candidate Senator John Kerry, have travelled to Egypt to ensure that this status quo is maintained. The Egyptian military is largely funded by the United States and coordinates all its major decisions with Washington and the Pentagon. The day a draft anti-strike and anti-protest law was tabled, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates was meeting with Field Marshal Mohammed Hussein Tantawi in Cairo. It is likely that the US also gave the green light for the deadly attack on the peaceful protesters on Friday.

The Egyptian revolution is entering a new phase; the various class forces are now more visible than at the beginning. The revolutionary demands of the Egyptian workers and young people increasingly challenge the interests of imperialism and the domination of capitalism in the region. The Egyptian bourgeoisie and its imperialist backers are increasingly turning to violence to halt the revolution.

This also applies to the bourgeois political opposition politicians. On the day of the fatal attack, Mohamed ElBaradei expressed his confidence that in the interest of "national unity" the army would not cross a "red line". In a statement on Saturday, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) assured the army that it valued its role of "protecting the revolution" and advocated the unity of the people with the army. The Brotherhood said it condemned all attempts by representatives of the old regime to destroy this unity.

Other leaders of the Egyptian bourgeoisie warned protesters against attempts to "drive a wedge between the people and the military". The military had supported the demands of the revolution from the first day, they said. The clashes were part of a schema to try to create animosity between protesters and the military, it was claimed. The signatories of this disgraceful statement include Essam El Erian (MB), George Ishak (a member of ElBaradei's National Alliance for Change), Amr Hamzawy (leader of the newly formed Social Democratic Party), authors Gamal Fahmy and Sekina Fouad, and Nasser Abdel Hamid (25 January Revolution Coalition).

The statements show on which side these self-appointed representatives of the new Egyptian democracy really stand. They argue along the same lines as the Military Council and the state television broadcasters, and say more or less openly that the peaceful protesters are thugs in the pay of the old regime, and are even responsible for the attacks. Egypt's ruling elite will not shrink from employing any dirty trick in order to put a violent end to the revolution.

To stop the counterrevolution and continue the struggle that was begun successfully, the Egyptian working class must now establish independent organisations and fight for an international socialist programme. Only the unity of all the oppressed in the region on such a basis can enable the masses to put an end to the brutal regime and its imperialist backers, and realise the demands for social equality, freedom and real democracy.



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