

US-backed Egyptian junta massacres peaceful protesters

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On Sunday evening the Egyptian military launched a brutal attack on protesters in Cairo, killing at least 36 and injuring hundreds. The crackdown happened after a peaceful demonstration by 10,000 protesters headed from Shubra, a working class suburb of Cairo, to the state television building in Maspilo in downtown Cairo. Most of the demonstrators were Copts protesting the ruling military council and demanding religious equality for the Christian minority in Egypt.

Last week a Coptic church was attacked in the Upper Egyptian city of Aswan. Many Egyptians suspect that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) was responsible for the incident. Abdel Tawab Hassan, an Egyptian activist, told the independent newspaper *Daily News Egypt* that the SCAF “wants to show that there is strife between the Egyptians, so it can continue tightening its grip” and enacting repressive legislation.

Many Muslims also reportedly joined the march to protest the regime’s attempts to incite sectarian strife between Muslims and Christians. They chanted “No to burning to churches,” directing slogans against the military junta and *de facto* dictator Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi: “The people desire the overthrow of Field Marshall Tantawi,” and “Down with military rule.”

On their way to Maspilo, marchers were attacked several times by stone-throwing thugs. At one point a car sped through the crowd, and shots were fired on protesters. When the demonstration arrived at the state television building, the Egyptian army then attacked the marchers with tear gas and batons. As the protesters tried to defend themselves, the military fired live ammunition into the crowd and armoured personnel carriers drove through the protesters, running them down. Videos on YouTube show footage of the brutal massacre, and eye-witnesses gave accounts of the shocking events.

“People in army uniforms were shooting live rounds at

us like we were flies, some people were able to run and others hid inside buildings,” one female protester told the independent newspaper *Daily News Egypt*. Another said: “I saw people squashed, being carried away in bloody blankets, families and children screaming, tear gas and people shot with live ammo bleeding.”

Some protesters managed to escape from the scene and started a march towards Tahrir Square. On their way they were again attacked by thugs and security forces. Eyewitnesses reported that a large group of thugs began to throw rocks at protesters near the Egyptian Museum, and police forces arrived with water cannon trucks to disperse the crowds. While struggling against the police and armed forces, protesters chanted: “Muslims and Christians united,” and “Death to the Field Marshal.”

The assault on protesters has been accompanied by a crackdown on TV channels transmitting live coverage of the violence unleashed by the army and police. The Egyptian military raided the offices of *Al-Hurra TV* and *Channel 25* in Cairo and stopped their broadcasts. The Egyptian independent daily *Al Masry Al Youm* reported that soldiers checked journalists’ ID cards to identify Christians, beating up some of them, including a pregnant woman.

At the same time, Egyptian state TV launched a massive propaganda campaign against the protesters and especially the Christian minority. Commentators accused the Copts of attacking and killing Egyptian soldiers, and called on Muslim citizens to take to the streets to protect the Egyptian army. According to some reports, some Islamist gangs armed with batons and shouting slogans for an Islamic state later took to the streets, joining attacks on the protesters.

Later during the night, Information Minister Osama Heikal appeared on State television and blamed “external forces” for initiating the clashes, claiming that the

Egyptian state is seriously threatened “by sectarian strife.” Prime Minister Essam Sharaf also gave a threatening speech, warning that Egypt’s security is endangered because of a “conspiracy” against the Armed Forces. He called on Coptic and Muslim religious figures, journalists, intellectuals and artists “to perform their national duty” and warned Egyptians against “listening to indeterminate rumours.” He then warned, “Beware of strife among yourselves.”

This most deadly crackdown of the military junta against protesters so far comes amidst a massive wave of strikes and protests in the last weeks. Since the end of Ramadan, hundreds of thousands of workers—including teachers, public transportation workers, doctors and industrial workers—have been on strike demanding higher wages, better working conditions and social equality.

During the strikes and protests, workers also demanded the fall of the military junta. It is widely seen as an extension of the Mubarak regime, intent on continuing the anti-democratic and anti-social policies of the former dictator, who was forced out of office by mass protests on February 11.

The renewed protests have sent shock waves through the Egyptian ruling elite, with spokesmen of the bourgeoisie warning of “another revolution” and demanding an end to strikes.

What is happening in Egypt now “is very reminiscent of 2 and 3 February,” noted Randa Abul Azm, a journalist with the satellite channel *Al-Arabiya*. In those days the Mubarak regime also cracked down on independent media and worked together with thugs during the infamous “Battle of the Camels” to clear protesters from Tahrir Square. One female protester told *Al Ahram Online* that the “army is treating us the same way Mubarak treated protesters during the revolution.”

The junta is working hand-in-hand with its supporters in the official parties and “independent” trade unions to stop the strikes and bring the situation under control. While the military try to forcibly break up the strikes, leaders of the Independent Teachers Union and the Independent Union of Public Transport Workers have called off mass strikes—even though the junta had refused to make any concessions.

Most of Egypt’s bourgeois parties signed a deal with the SCAF for a “schedule for the remaining tasks yet to be accomplished during the transitional period.” The document states that the military will keep power at least until the end of 2012, contradicting the generals’ initial pledges to stand down after six months to free the way for

democratic elections.

The current deal aims to prop up the junta, though more Egyptians are hostile to Mubarak’s generals in the SCAF than ever before.

In recent weeks the junta has continuously tightened its grip on power and stepped up its violence against protesters and strikers. It began to apply an anti-strike and protest law and announced an extension of the emergency laws; scores of protesters have been arrested, sent to military trials and reportedly been tortured by police and military forces.

The massive violence of the military unleashed on Sunday is a warning to the Egyptian working class: the junta is preparing even greater violence to crush the revolution. The attempt to incite sectarian strife between Copts and Muslims has been repeatedly used by the Egyptian bourgeoisie to distract from the class struggle.

Just a few weeks before the Egyptian Revolution began on January 25, a bomb attack was carried out against a Coptic church in Alexandria, killing over twenty people. There are many indications that the Egyptian secret services, working with extremist Salafi groups, were behind the attack.

Western governments have largely passed over the Egyptian junta’s Sunday massacre in silence. They all regard the Egyptian junta as the backbone of capitalist rule and the main defender of their imperialist interests in Egypt and throughout the region. Their silence shows that they back the junta’s criminal acts, just as they backed Mubarak.

Only last week US Secretary of Defence and former head of the CIA Leon Panetta met Field Marshal Tantawi in Cairo. According to media reports, Panetta praised “the council’s ability to bypass all obstacles during the transitional period.”

According to the *Washington Post*, Panetta was “full of praise during his visit,” saying: “I really do have full confidence in the process that the Egyptian military is overseeing. I think they’re making good progress.”



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