Protests mount against power grab by Egyptian military

Patrick Martin
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Thousands of young people are participating in a renewed campaign of protests in Tahrir Square against the drive by the ruling Egyptian military junta to entrench its position and maintain control over Egypt.

The demonstrations, under the slogan of "reclaim the revolution," give voice to the widespread popular distrust of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which took power after the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak in February.

SCAF leader Mohammed Tantawi, a longtime stooge of Mubarak, has pledged to turn over power to a civilian administration once the parliamentary elections are completed.

The elections to the lower house begin November 28, but the deliberately cumbersome process is dragged out over six months, after which the elected bodies are to draft a constitution, leading in turn to a presidential election by the end of 2012 or early 2013.

Throughout this entire period the SCAF is to wield essentially unchecked executive power, and the military chieftains have retained the hated emergency law that was in force throughout Mubarak's 30-year presidency, making all forms of political opposition presumptively illegal.

The official start of the election campaign November 2 was overshadowed, however, by a heavy-handed pronouncement by the generals that they seek a veto over any future legislation dealing with military affairs, as well as freedom of the armed forces from legislative oversight, essentially making the military an independent power accountable to no one but itself.

The measure, approved by the cabinet but not yet by the SCAF itself, would establish a 22-article "charter of principles," effectively preempting much of the work of drafting a new constitution. One of these "principles" would declare the armed forces the protector of "constitutional legitimacy." Such wording has the most ominous implications for democracy, particularly in a country that has been subjected to military dictatorship for the last 60 years—and before that, to monarchy and colonial rule.

The charter would limit the newly elected parliament to selecting only 20 of the 100-member panel mandated to draft a new constitution. The remaining 80 would be selected by other institutions—including the military brass, the judiciary and university officials (all former Mubarak appointees) and other supposed representatives of "civil society." In other words, the constitutional panel will consist largely of holdovers from the Mubarak dictatorship and direct representatives of big business.

The blatant effort to rig the constitutional panel was combined with stepped-up repression of political activists. A well-known blogger, Alaa Abdel Fattah, who came to prominence as an early opponent of the Mubarak dictatorship, was jailed by a military court in late October on charges of inciting violence against the military.

Abdel Fattah had publicly charged the military with responsibility for the bloodbath of Coptic Christian demonstrators last month, in which at least 27 people were shot to death or crushed by military vehicles in an assault on a protest in Cairo. The blogger is one of 30 people jailed for at least 15 days, while charges against them are pursued through the military court. Under the emergency laws, they could be jailed indefinitely.

A communiqué issued November 3 and signed by numerous activist groups was published on the website of the "No to military trials" campaign, together with calls for mass protests both in Egypt and internationally on Saturday, November 12.

As quoted in the *Guardian*, the statement reads:

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“Again and again the army and the police have attacked us, beaten us, arrested us, killed us. And we have resisted, we have continued; some of these days we lost, others we won, but never without cost. Over a thousand gave their lives to remove Mubarak. Many more have joined them in death since. We go on so that their deaths will not be in vain.”

The statement goes on to pledge a refusal to cooperate with military trials and prosecutions or to answer any questions posed by military tribunals.

In a message smuggled out of prison published in the *Guardian* and the Egyptian daily *Al-Shorouk*, Abdel Fattah said he had been offered release from prison if he agreed not to publicly criticize military leader Tantawi. He rejected the offer.

Lalia Soueif, Abdel Fattah’s mother and a university professor, began a hunger strike November 6 to protest her son’s detention. She told the Egyptian media that she had notified the prosecutor of the hunger strike.

The Muslim Brotherhood, the leading right-wing bourgeois political organization, has opposed the new “charter of principles” but sought to maintain a distance from the youth groups that called the November 12 protest. The Islamists set Friday, November 18 for their own protest in Tahrir Square against the military usurpation

The Muslim Brotherhood demanded the resignation of deputy prime minister Ali al-Silmi, who first made public the proposed “charter of principles.” Saad el-Katatni, a spokesman for the Freedom and Justice Party, the political arm of the Brotherhood, said: “This route goes against the will of the people, and will lead to another revolution. We call on the people of Egypt to reject the document to protect their rights.”

Press accounts said the military leadership was seeking to win support from liberal bourgeois groups, and above all from the major imperialist powers, by presenting the new plan as an effort to forestall a takeover of the constitutional panel by the Muslim Brotherhood—which is expected to win at least a plurality of seats in the new parliament.

Tantawi and his supporters evidently miscalculated the popular reaction, which has made it impossible for either the liberals or the imperialist powers, at least initially, to openly endorse his brazen assault on democratic principles.

Mohamed ElBaradei, the former head of the UN’s nuclear inspection agency IAEA and a liberal presidential hopeful, criticized the proposal as a plan for “military guardianship.”

There were critical comments in the Western press, with the *Washington Post* calling the plan “Egypt’s step back.” The *Post* editorial called on the Obama administration to use its influence, particularly the huge US financial subsidy to the Egyptian military, to “insist that the armed forces respect their promise of a democratic transition.”

Such pseudo-democratic rhetoric only shows that Washington is uneasy over the prospects for a military crackdown in Egypt, given the mass opposition from the working class and youth and the discredited role of Tantawi and SCAF. The same newspaper, and the ruling elite for which it speaks, applaud far more brutal repressive measures taken by longtime US allies like Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Jordan and Morocco.

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