

# Mass protests intensify against Egyptian junta

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Clashes continued yesterday in cities across Egypt, on the fifth day of mass protests demanding the overthrow of the US-backed Egyptian military junta. The protests started Saturday, when police used live ammunition and rubber bullets against a sit-in by a few hundred protesters in Tahrir Square, in Cairo.

Demonstrations have spread across the country, with hundreds of thousands filling Tahrir Square and clashing with police outside the Interior Ministry, which oversees Egypt's hated police forces. Demonstrations also shook Alexandria, Port-Said, Qena, Aswan, Assiut, and other cities. There are calls for a million-man march in Cairo tomorrow.

These are the most powerful demonstrations since mass strikes and protests in February forced out pro-US dictator President Hosni Mubarak. The masses are turning against the military, whose leaders control much of the wealth of the country and formed the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) junta led by Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi to replace Mubarak. Protesters rejected Tantawi's proposals on Tuesday to erect a civilian caretaker government next year, correctly fearing that this would only be a façade for continuing military rule.

The army and security forces have responded with an orgy of violence, trying to smash the protests. Significantly, Egyptian state media have cited police repression of Occupy Wall Street protests in the United States as a justification for the army's deadly violence against the Egyptian people.

As of yesterday morning, at least 35 protesters had been killed and an estimated 2,000 wounded by Egyptian security forces over the five days of protests. Three more protesters were reported shot and killed in Cairo yesterday morning, as protesters took the wounded to hospitals in ambulances or on scooters. Security forces also shot a 10-year-old boy in the head with a bullet; he was not expected to survive.

Protesters in Cairo chanted "The people want the

removal of the Field Marshal" and "Shame, shame, shame, the Army kills revolutionaries."

The state-owned daily *Al Ahrām* reported that police broke a two-hour truce negotiated by Muslim clerics yesterday evening on Mohamed Mahmoud Street, near the Interior Ministry. They fired intense volleys of tear gas against protesters who shouted, "We will not leave, SCAF should leave" and "Muslims and Christians are one hand."

Protesters in the port city of Alexandria set up barricades outside police headquarters and were attacked by security forces. One protester was reportedly shot dead.

*Al Jazeera* wrote that there was an element of "self-preservation" in police attacks in Alexandria, as police fear that protesters might raid their weapon stockpiles and arm themselves for defense against the junta. Police headquarters, reporter Rawya Rageh noted, "is not only a place of law and order, but also a place where there is a large stockpile of weapons. [The police] cannot let the protesters take over."

Questions are emerging about the massive use of tear gas by police forces, especially after several people reportedly died due to asphyxiation by gas. Khalid Hamdi, working at a field clinic in Tahrir Square, told *Al Jazeera*: "We've seen many faintings and we'd never seen that before. About 70 percent of the injuries are fainting. People are coming in with asthma, convulsions sometimes—this wasn't often [the case] before."

Many protesters have taken to wearing gas masks when going to demonstrations.

In a press conference yesterday, Health Minister Amr Helmy acknowledged the use of live ammunition against protesters since Saturday—which had previously been denied by police. He denied reports, however, that Egyptian police have put nerve agents in tear gas, noting that the tear gas canisters came from the United States. Helmy claimed that "seizures and fainting symptoms were from the tear gas."

The two main companies exporting tear gas to Egypt are

Combined Systems Inc. and NonLethal Technologies Inc., both based in the US state of Pennsylvania.

Renewed mass protests against the US-backed junta have exploded the lies the Western powers used against revolutionary struggles that broke out in the Middle East this year. Washington, which funds the Egyptian military to the tune of \$1.3 billion per year, postured as supporting a SCAF-led “democratic transition” in Egypt—while continuing to back the junta’s dictatorial rule against the working class. The US government and its European allies are again desperately trying to disarm and suppress revolutionary struggles against a Western-backed puppet regime.

For the time being, the US government is still backing Tantawi’s plans. On Wednesday US State Department spokesman Victoria Nuland endorsed a July 2012 deadline Tantawi set for handing over power to an elected government.

The Western press is increasingly backing proposals, first made by official “opposition” politician Mohamed ElBaradei, for a formal transfer of power to a “national salvation” government, presided by a politician chosen by the junta. There are calls to scrap the SCAF-controlled elections and immediately install a civilian government.

German government spokesman Steffen Seibert said : “The demonstrators’ demands ... for a quick transition to a civilian government are understandable from the German government’s point of view.”

These plans are increasingly driven by a fear that the SCAF regime may collapse. In a comment titled “Egypt’s Doomed Elections” in yesterday’s *New York Times*, Andrew Reynolds argued that Egypt “is careening toward a disastrous parliamentary election that begins on November 28 and could bring the country to the brink of civil war.” Reynolds cited Egyptian Coptic Christians’ fear of a government dominated by the right-wing Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, and evidence that election rules still favored incumbents in parliamentary elections.

In the British *Guardian*, Ahdaf Soueif wrote: “The crucial thing now is to stand firm until SCAF hands over power. To whom? To a government headed by any one or more of our potential presidential candidates—and this government would run for elections.”

These comments evade the critical point: such a government would be reactionary and correctly rejected as illegitimate by the Egyptian population, precisely because it would emerge not from the revolutionary struggles of the Egyptian working class, but the plots of the SCAF. Its goal would be to protect the wealth and

power of the Egyptian ruling class and their ties to the major imperialist powers.

The objective logic of the mass struggles underway against the Egyptian military dictatorship demands that the working class overthrow the junta and take power, instead of accepting another regime vetted by the Egyptian generals, NATO, and Washington. A new, socialist perspective is required. The working class must form its own organizations to overthrow the junta and take state power, based on a struggle to place the economic resources of Egypt and the world under its democratic control.

The most dangerous opponents of this perspective have been Egypt’s “left” opposition parties, who have promoted a bankrupt perspective of working with the Islamists and pushing for “democratic space” under the aegis of the junta’s dictatorship. Such politics, which have allowed the Islamist parties to posture as the leading opposition to the regime, are increasingly despised by the working class.

On Tuesday night Abou El-Ghar of Egypt’s Social-Democratic Party felt compelled to distance himself from his party’s decision to participate in meetings with SCAF vice-president Sami Anan. Claiming that he had believed the junta’s claims that “violence would stop immediately,” he said he was “truly sorry for participating in the meeting with the SCAF.”

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[21 November, 2011]



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