

Egyptian military junta raids, shuts down political organizations

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Last Thursday Egypt's public prosecutor, supported by armed military and police forces, closed 17 offices of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Cairo. Computers and files were removed and offices shut and sealed. Amongst the raided NGOs were the American International Republican Institute (IRI), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), Freedom House, and the German Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

Interim Prime Minister Kamal Ganzouri accused the NGOs and some newly founded political groups, like the April 6 youth movement, of receiving illicit and unregistered foreign funding. Already in October Minister of Justice Mohamed Abdel Aziz El-Gendi assigned two judges to investigate the allegations. He stated that any organization illegally funded from abroad would be charged with betraying Egypt by deliberately "promoting political strife."

The Egyptian regime and the state media long ago launched a propaganda campaign against a so-called "third foreign hand" allegedly inciting strife in Egypt to destabilize the country. Already former dictator President Hosni Mubarak used this propaganda technique, blaming "foreign entities" for being behind the revolutionary upheaval against his regime.

After a massive strike wave erupted in September involving 750,000 workers, and the recent mass protests against military rule in November and December, the junta increased its repression and vicious propaganda. This propaganda includes the junta's regular letters, published on its Facebook page, to justify brutal crackdowns on protesters in an attempt to crush the revolution. Letter 51 denounced a "conspiracy [which] attempts to drive a wedge between the people and the army, and an internal wedge inside the armed forces."

The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information described the crackdown on NGOs as an attempt "to intimidate activists and rights advocates, gag them, and

freeze their activities in support of human rights and against repression and torture." It decried "a systematic campaign against these organizations, prepared in advance, while the media paved the way for it a long time ago."

In the weeks before the anniversary of the beginning of the Egyptian Revolution on January 25, the Egyptian ruling elite is increasingly concerned about the danger of renewed mass protests. For the masses, little has changed since the ouster of Mubarak. The military junta and its leader, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, are as hated as the former dictator himself. The military regime has imprisoned over 12,000 civilians and also extended the state of emergency. Social inequality is growing, and the Egyptian economy is in deep crisis.

In its recently published letter 92, the junta claimed that it feared "a continuing plot that aims at aborting and toppling the state by increasing sit-ins and protests." An unidentified official told the news agency MENA that this "plot" aims to turn peaceful protests on January 25 into a "civil war" paving the way for foreign military intervention.

The Egyptian junta, which receives \$1.3 billion in yearly funding from the US, is trying to create an atmosphere of fear and hysteria to justify mass repression against the working class. It is promoting the lie that the Egyptian revolution, which has consisted of a series of mass working class struggles, is only a foreign plot orchestrated by other governments and pro-Western NGOs.

The junta's leading generals will recall very well that Washington reacted to mass protests one year ago by backing middle-class youth groups and political organizations calling for Mubarak to be replaced by other forces inside the army. As the one-year anniversary of these protests approaches, they are deliberately targeting these groups in an attempt to avoid Mubarak's fate.

They are relying on the fact that these NGOs have no social base in the working class, and are in fact closely tied to US imperialism. They have also been the beneficiaries of massive US funding, broadly promoting the view that—under pressure from the NGOs and petty-bourgeois “left” parties—the junta would oversee a transition to democracy. On this basis they opposed any attempt to mobilize the working class in struggle to overthrow the junta and fight for socialist policies.

Now, as the Egyptian ruling elite descends into bitter internal struggles, the junta is moving to blunt their influence, before the Western powers consider using them to effect another change of personnel at the top of the Egyptian state. This further underlines the necessity for the working class to organize itself in struggle against all factions of the Egyptian ruling elite and their imperialist backers.

Petty-bourgeois left groups such as the Egyptian Social Democratic Party (ESDP) and the Revolutionary Socialists (RS) have close ties to NGOs funded by US imperialism. They falsely try to present the NGOs (and also themselves) as pro-revolutionary organizations. The RS published a statement on their website claiming that the closure of the NGOs would be “a desperate attempt to silence the voice of the oppressed.”

Liberals like El Baradei and the ESDP, the RS and some other liberal and “left” groups are therefore regularly calling for a transfer to “civilian rule”, a position which is also increasingly shared by US government.

The Obama administration has demanded that the Egyptian junta stop the raids. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and US ambassador to Egypt Anne Patterson held talks with Egyptian officials on the topic on December 30. State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said that the US expects “all international NGOs, including those that receive US government support, to be able to return to normal operations as soon as possible in support of democracy and free elections.”

According to reports in *Campaigns & Elections* (C&E) magazine, the Obama administration funneled some \$200 million into Egypt ahead of the parliamentary elections. The article claims that NGOs like the IRI focused on building up the country’s Western-leaning political parties, to counterbalance the influence of the Islamist Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB).

The article does not say who these parties are exactly, but the US government has long worked closely with NGOs and political groups in Egypt—mainly amongst the

petty-bourgeois “left”—to promote the interests of US imperialism. According to Professor Gamal Zahran of Suez Canal University, Washington increasingly directed its civilian funding to so-called “civil society” groups, starting during the second term of the Bush administration (2005-2008).

According to a secret December 2008 US diplomatic cable published by WikiLeaks, such ties went so far that various Egyptian organizations discussed with Washington “an unwritten plan for a transition to a parliamentary democracy.” According to the cable, this plan was supported by “several opposition forces—including the Wafd, Nasserite, Karama and Tagammu parties, and the Muslim Brotherhood, Kifaya, and Revolutionary Socialists.” The same cable also said that the opposition was “interested in receiving support from the army and the police for a transitional government prior the 2011 elections.”

These forces sense that continued military rule could further radicalize the Egyptian masses and provoke another mass upheaval, with potentially devastating consequences for top officials. Just before the beginning of the parliamentary elections, the junta made clear that it will not give up its special position in the new constitution or subject the army’s budget to parliamentary discussion. The military controls a vast business empire—it runs factories and controls large swathes of public land—and cannot accept any threat to its privileged position.

There are signs that the MB would be willing to protect the special role of the military in order to strike a deal with the generals. The FJP won approximately 50 per cent in the first two rounds of the parliamentary elections and will dominate the new parliament.

According to the privately owned Egyptian daily *Al-Tahrir*, Essam Al-Erian, the vice chairman of the FJP, announced that, “the military has the right to enjoy a special position in the upcoming constitution, more than in previous ones.” He also stated that the transfer of power to an elected civilian authority “should not result in the disappearance of the junta from the political scene.”



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