

Mass protests in Egypt against pro-junta football riot

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Thousands of protesters marched on the Egyptian interior ministry in Cairo yesterday, amid growing anger over the riot at Wednesday's football (soccer) match in Port Said between Cairo's Ahly club and Port Said's Al-Masry club.

Just as the match ended, hooligans stormed onto the field to attack Ahly players and fans with knives, bottles, clubs, and firecrackers. At least 73 people were killed and 1,000 wounded, with 200 in serious condition. Security forces present at the stadium did nothing to halt the assault.

Demonstrators in Cairo marched through Tahrir Square, the iconic center of revolutionary working class struggles last year that toppled President Hosni Mubarak. They then marched on the interior ministry, chanting slogans against Egypt's US-backed military dictatorship, led by Field Marshal Mohammed Hussein Tantawi: "Down, down with the military" and "Tomorrow we step on the face of the field marshal."

There were violent clashes last night outside the interior ministry, as security forces faced off against over 10,000 protesters. Police fired heavy volleys of tear gas as protesters cut through barbed wire fences protecting the ministry and toppling concrete barriers that have protected its offices since last November's protests.

Protesters burned tires and organized crews of motorcycle drivers to ferry wounded protesters to hospitals. Some 100 protesters passed out, reportedly due to heavy use of tear gas.

A coalition of political parties and youth groups has

called for a mass demonstration today, outside the Egyptian parliament. A coalition of bourgeois "left" parties—including the Wafd party, the National Association for Change of Mohamed ElBaradei, and the Karama party—held a meeting calling for the parliament to vote a no-confidence motion in the cabinet of Prime Minister Kamal El-Ganzouri.

The right-wing Muslim Brotherhood also criticized the violence, with legislator Essam el-Erian calling it "the result of intentional reluctance by the military and the police."

A class gulf separates the reactions of the political parties to this incident from those of the population, who responded to the event not by demands to remove various parliamentary figureheads for the junta, but for the overthrow of the US-backed junta.

The fans, or ultras, of the Ahly club issued a statement denouncing the military junta: "They want to punish and execute us for our participation in the revolution against suppression." The fans called for "new war in defense of the revolution."

The clashes yesterday marked the one-year anniversary of the famous "Battle of the Camels," when Mubarak tried to defeat the revolution by sending police thugs mounted on camels through army lines to clear protesters off Tahrir square. The protesters defeated the thugs in street fighting, however, and nine days later Mubarak was forced to step down.

Reports suggest that the Al-Masry riot was a political ambush abetted by police on the Ahly fans, who have played an important role in anti-regime protests.

Together with fans of the Zamalek White Knights, a rival football club in nearby Giza, they participated in street fighting in Cairo, first against the Mubarak regime and then the military junta that replaced him.

Le Monde cited Sophie Pommier, an Egypt scholar for the Institute of Political Studies in Paris: “During the revolution, they played an important role by contributing their experience of street fighting against the security forces, allowing the revolutionaries to hold Tahrir Square. After Mubarak’s fall, they continued to clash with police and the junta which, in their opinion, have stolen power. They also played a role in other affairs, including the attack on the Israeli embassy and on the Interior Ministry.”

Only two days before the Port Said match, they again came to the attention of the junta, during a match broadcast live on television, by holding up flags with pictures of martyrs of the revolution and chanting, “Down with the military regime!”

The police at the Port Said match on Wednesday responded with a total failure to enforce normal security procedures. Port Said’s governor and local security chief unexpectedly did not attend, while Al-Masry fans chanted slogans in support of Tantawi and the junta and threw stones or other projectiles at the Ahly fans. Egyptian police made no attempt to hold fans from the two teams apart from each other as Al-Masry fans stormed the field, climbing onto the Ahly fans’ bleachers, and began to attack.

One Al-Masry fan told the *Guardian*: “A police officer told supporters to come onto the pitch, the gates to the pitch were opened on purpose by someone before the game started ... When the match was over, supporters rushed onto the pitch and then the lights went off. People didn’t know who was with whom. I then saw people throwing the al-Ahly supporters from the stands. The gate at the exit was also closed by someone on purpose.”

According to Twitter reports, many of the Ahly fans were killed or hurt when they found that exits through which they were trying to flee the stadium were locked. Stuck inside narrow corridors blocked by the locked

doors, they were crushed by armed gangs of Al-Masry fans.

World-famous Egyptian football players on the Ahly team, barricaded inside their locker room, reported the ongoing massacre by phone, asking for help. Mohamed Abu Trika said, “The security forces left us, they did not protect us. One fan has just died in the dressing room in front of me.”

Al-Masry security supervisor Mohamed Saleh said that he noticed “strangers” in the crowd during the match. He added, “The locks on three gates were broken during the game, by who I don’t know. ... I’ve never believed in conspiracies until yesterday. I’ve decided not to work in football again.”

After military and police units intervened, injured Ahly supporters were placed on aircraft or on a train back to Cairo; thousands gathered at the Ramses train station to greet the train. The names of those confirmed dead were also read out, amid chants calling for the downfall of the regime and the execution of Tantawi.

Mahmoud Hani, who lost a friend in the clashes, said: “It is clear that the fight was arranged and the security forces participated in this, to take the spotlight away from the revolution. The state needs people to be focused on something else.”

Another Ahly fan said, “The military is working for the old regime. The regime hasn’t changed, only Hosni Mubarak has changed. The military doesn’t want change. They want revenge on the revolution and to keep the country corrupt.”



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