

Egyptian junta lifts travel ban on NGO operatives

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On Thursday, a US military plane flew several American NGO operatives out of Egypt following the lifting of a travel ban by the ruling military junta. The move was a climb-down by the regime, which had insisted on proceeding with plans to try the Americans for illegally interfering in Egyptian affairs. It followed weeks of intense pressure from Washington.

US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland declared that the US was “very pleased,” but stressed that “the departure of our people doesn’t resolve the legal case or the larger issues concerning the NGOs.” She added that the US remains “deeply concerned about the prosecution” and wants “to see the NGO situation settled in a manner that allows all NGOs [...] to be registered.”

In June, the Egyptian interim government accused several NGOs and political organizations working in Egypt of receiving illicit and unregistered foreign funding. The campaign against the NGOs started after the US Agency for International Development (USAID) told Egyptian newspapers it was supporting “pro-democracy” initiatives in Egypt.

According to media reports, the Obama administration funneled some \$200 million into Egypt ahead of the parliamentary elections held last November. The US was reportedly seeking to prop up the country’s pro-Western political parties to counterbalance the Islamist Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB).

In October, Egyptian Minister of Justice Mohamed Abdel Aziz El-Gendi assigned two judges to investigate the allegations, and on December 29 armed military and police forces stormed and closed the offices of 17 NGOs in Cairo. Amongst the raided organizations were the American International Republican Institute (IRI), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), Freedom House and the German Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

However, shortly before a trial of 43 people, including

16 Americans, was about to start on February 26, the Egyptian authorities announced a postponement. The lifting of the travel ban enabled the defendants—including the IRI director in Egypt, Sam LaHood, son of US Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood—to leave the country.

Prior to the postponement of the trial, the US government stepped up its pressure on the junta. High-ranking US officials, including the head of the IRI and Republican Senator John McCain, visited Egypt and stressed the need for a quick resolution of the crisis. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other leading US politicians threatened to cut the annual allocation of \$1.3 billion in military aid if the Egyptian authorities did not back down.

On Tuesday, Clinton told a Senate hearing: “We’ve had a lot of very tough conversations and I think we’re... moving towards a resolution.” She added that Cairo was “coming to understand” that Washington was serious about the threat to cut off aid to Egypt.

While it remains unlikely that the US would have cut its aid to the Egyptian junta—the chairman of the US Joint Chief of Staffs, General Martin Dempsey, recently said such a step would be against US interests—certain tensions have been growing between the US and the regime in Cairo in recent months.

Initially, the US and the Egyptian military acted in concert to bring the mass protests and strikes by the working class to a halt in order to safeguard the Egyptian bourgeois state and the interests of US imperialism. On February 11 of last year, the US gave the nod to replace its longtime ally and Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), headed by Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, minister of defense under Mubarak.

When the mass strikes continued, the junta was forced to offer an “enlarged democratic space” to elements of the

affluent middle class, including the Western-backed NGOs, the “independent” trade unions, and pseudo-left political organizations such as the April 6 Youth Movement and the Revolutionary Socialists (RS). In return, these groups defended the military junta and opposed demands for a “second revolution” raised by workers and youth during mass protests in May and July.

But this strategy of granting a field of operations to these organizations was not without risks for the generals. The class struggle intensified once again before and after the elections in November and culminated in a million-strong mass protest demanding the downfall of the regime on the one-year anniversary of the Egyptian revolution. The US, the Western-backed NGOs and their pseudo-left allies became convinced that a nominally civilian regime controlled from behind by the military would be more effective in preventing a “second revolution,” and pressured the military for a faster transfer of power.

The generals of the junta had not forgotten that Washington, in the face of a revolutionary upsurge last year, had promoted such forces to support the ousting of Mubarak and his replacement by other military figures. In an attempt to avoid Mubarak’s fate, the junta violently cracked down not only on the working class, but also on some of the Western-backed organizations. At the same time, the campaign against the NGOs, in the name of opposing “foreign interference,” enabled the SCAF generals to appeal to anti-imperialist sentiment and obscure their subordination to Washington.

The crackdown on the NGOs was initially supported by the Muslim Brotherhood. The Islamists worked closely with the junta from the start and opposed protests against military rule. They have close ties to the ultra-reactionary Gulf monarchies that opposed the removal of Mubarak and fear any concessions to democratic sentiments out of fear that their own absolutist rule could be undermined.

The Gulf states increased their financing of the Egyptian Islamists of the MB and the far-right Salafists. Saudi-Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates also pledged \$10 billion of foreign aid to the junta, enabling the generals to turn down an IMF loan in June.

However, the MB slowly began to change course after it gained 47 percent of the seats in the Egyptian parliament in the November elections. Several high-ranking US delegations met with leaders of the MB in their headquarters in Cairo in order establish closer relations with the Islamists. On February 20, the Brotherhood’s political party, the FJP, declared in a statement its

“support for the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in supporting the democratic process.”

Senator McCain was one of the main brokers in the NGO controversy, meeting with General Tantawi and MB leaders alike. He issued a press release immediately after the travel ban was lifted on Thursday, thanking the Muslim Brotherhood and its political party for “the constructive role played over the past week” and said, “their statement of February 20 was important in helping to resolve the recent crisis.”

The conflict between the US and the Egyptian junta developed against the background of a deepening crisis of the Egyptian economy. International rating agencies downgraded Egypt several times and international financial markets demand further attacks on the Egyptian working class. In December, the Egyptian junta turned back to the IMF and asked for a new loan, a move that was supported by the FJP but widely opposed by the Egyptian masses.

It appears that the US used its control of the IMF to step up its pressure on the Egyptian junta to allow for the establishment of a more sophisticated political mechanism for advancing the counterrevolution against the working class.

On Monday, the FJP issued a statement renewing its call for a national unity government. It declared, “Egypt is suffering from escalating economic and security crises that confirm the failure of the government.” The call was immediately supported by five parties in the Egyptian parliament, including the pro-Western “left” Egyptian Social Democratic Party, which has close ties to the NGOs.

On Wednesday, the Supreme Council for Presidential Elections announced at a press conference that the first round of presidential elections, previously postponed, will be held May 23 and 24.



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