

As protests mount against election-rigging

Egyptian military junta steps up threats of violence

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In the wake of a brutal massacre in Cairo, Egypt's ruling military junta issued a public warning Thursday against further protests over the exclusion of candidates from the upcoming May 23 presidential election, threatening further violence against planned demonstrations outside the Ministry of Defense.

At a press conference called by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, Major General Mokhtar al-Mulla warned that any further protests in Cairo's Abbasseya Square, where the Ministry of Defense is located, would be suppressed by force.

"The responsibility, the duty, the law and the right to self-defense, as well as the honor of the military obligates members of the armed forces to defend the defense ministry and its military installations because they are a symbol of military honor and the stature of the nation," he declared.

"If anyone approaches, they should hold themselves responsible," he continued. "The forces deployed around the Ministry of Defense intend to stop anyone from trying to reach the ministry."

Another SCAF leader, Major General Mohammed al-Assar, demanded that all political parties direct protesters away from Abbasseya Square. They should tell youth to "go to Tahrir Square," he said, and "to stay away from the defense ministry because we don't want to use any violence against our youths."

Such statements make it clear that the military junta is behind the violence unleashed against protesters in Abbasseya Square Wednesday, when more than a dozen were killed and several hundred were wounded in a series of assaults by heavily armed thugs.

The protests began last weekend with a sit-in by supporters of Hazem Salah Abu Ismail, candidate of the

Islamic fundamentalist Salafi Call, who is running on a program of right-wing populism appealing mainly to the poorest layers in the urban and rural population.

The Presidential Elections Commission, handpicked by SCAF, disqualified Abu Ismail because his mother became a naturalized American citizen before her death—putting him in violation of an anti-democratic election law that requires all candidates to be the children of Egyptian citizens.

The Salafists were later joined in the sit-in by members of the April 6 Youth Movement and other liberal protest groups, who opposed the actions of the military regime in disqualifying 10 of the 23 candidates who sought to run in the election. Supporters of liberal Islamist Abdel Moneim Abouel Fotouh, who has been endorsed by the Salafists in place of Abu Ismail, also joined the protest, as did supporters of other candidates.

When the thugs attacked Wednesday morning, they took their toll among supporters of all the different political tendencies in the square, carrying out an indiscriminate bloodbath. At least five youth were brought to the emergency room with fatal gunshot wounds to the head, while others had been stabbed and beaten, others injured by teargas grenades—a weapon that could only have been supplied to the thugs by the police or military.

Eyewitnesses cited in press reports said that in some cases protesters were attacked and murdered as they were leaving the sit-in to go to work or take the subway. One protester said, "I saw seven people gunned down in front of me by a machine gun."

Another protester described the scene as follows: "dozens of military men dressed in plain clothes started pelting with stones, cement blocks, and fired tear gas

from rifles, so they were obviously security officers under cover.”

Protesters told McClatchy News Service that the attack resembled the assault last year on anti-Mubarak demonstrators in Tahrir Square by thugs riding camels, another case where the security forces orchestrated the violence and then stood aside and let it happen.

The April 6 Youth Movement denounced the violence and said the military leadership should be held accountable for “crimes committed against the revolution and revolutionaries. ... These practices are a continuation of the cleansing and killing methods which the army council uses to suppress the revolution.”

The carnage provoked widespread anger throughout Egypt, and most of the presidential candidates announced a temporary halt to their campaigns, to honor the dead and allow for unified protest demonstrations against the attack, set to begin Friday in Tahrir Square. One candidate suggested that further clashes outside the Ministry of Defense could lead the army “to announce a military coup in defense of themselves and their position.”

At their press conference Thursday, the generals denied that the violence had been provoked to provide a pretext for a military coup or postponing the elections. They claimed the elections would go forward with the first round May 23-24, a runoff June 16-17, and the transfer of power from SCAF to the newly elected president, scheduled for June 30.

At the same time, they ruled out any concessions to the protests against the exclusion of candidates from the election. Major-General Mulla declared that Article 28 of the Constitutional Declaration drafted by SCAF, the basis for the exclusion of the candidates, “has the force of law and cannot be canceled by the force of bullying.”

The Presidential Elections Commission, in a decision that further exacerbates the crisis, announced Thursday that it was referring three candidates, Abouel Fotouh, Mohammed Morsy of the Muslim Brotherhood and former foreign minister Amr Moussa, to the public prosecutor on charges of violating election regulations by campaigning “illegally” at universities.

This raises the prospect of further anti-democratic measures by the military junta with the goal of manipulating the results of the election. Fotouh,

Moussa and Morsy are currently the top three candidates in the polls, which suggest a highly uncertain outcome. None of the 13 candidates received more than 11 percent support in the latest pre-election poll, and 44 percent of those responding said they were undecided.



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