

Egyptian junta intensifies crackdown before presidential elections

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The Egyptian military junta has intensified its violent crackdown on protesters before the presidential elections scheduled for May 23. On Friday afternoon, military police and security police working with armed thugs brutally attacked protesters in front of the Ministry of Defense at Abbasseya Square in Cairo.

The protesters called for the fall of the US-backed military junta and the execution of its leader, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi.

Military and police forces started their attacks Friday afternoon, claiming that demonstrators had tried to storm the Ministry of Defense. They used water cannons, tear gas and live ammunition against the protesters, who defended themselves with stones. At least two protesters and one soldier were killed and hundreds injured. The military enforced a curfew in the area. According to the “No To Military Trials” activist group, 311 male and 18 female protesters have been arrested and threatened with military trials.

The demonstrations in front of the ministry were called by various liberal and middle-class groups such as Kefaya (Enough), the April 6 Youth Movement, the Egyptian Social Democratic Party and the Revolutionary Socialists to put pressure on the military junta. Simultaneously, the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood (MB) called for protests on Tahrir Square in Cairo in solidarity with the protests in front of the ministry.

These groups demand a swift transfer of power to civilians and the cancellation of Article 28 of the Constitutional Declaration. This article holds that the decisions of the Supreme Presidential Elections Commission (SPEC), which oversees the presidential poll, cannot be challenged in court. To prevent election rigging, the groups demand independent judges to monitor the elections. They also denounced the recent

violent attack on a sit-in in front of the Ministry of Interior. The protest was initially organized by supporters of the disqualified Salafist presidential candidate Hazem Salah Abu Ismail.

Eyewitnesses recounted that the protests were peaceful until a group of thugs infiltrated them and started provocations. There are indications that the military rulers orchestrated the incident. The day before, Major General Mokhtar al-Mulla warned that any further protests in Abbasseya Square would be forcibly suppressed. At a press conference called by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), he warned that anyone who approaches the Defense Ministry “should hold themselves responsible,” and that “the forces deployed around the Ministry of Defense intend to stop anyone from trying to reach the ministry.”

The crackdown comes amidst deepening conflicts inside the Egyptian ruling elite. Tensions between SCAF and the MB and its political arm, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), have risen in recent weeks.

Initially, SCAF, its sponsors in the US, and the MB made an alliance to suppress last year’s mass uprising of the Egyptian workers and youth. The Islamist MB supported the junta when it took power after the ouster of longtime dictator Hosni Mubarak on February 11, 2011, and carried out a crackdown on strikes and protests.

However, after their gains in the parliamentary elections, which saw a low turnout after mass protests against military rule last November, the MB took a more confrontational stance towards the SCAF junta.

The FJP has repeatedly demanded the replacement of the military-appointed interim government headed by Prime Minister Kamal Ganzouri with a parliamentary elected government. As the military opposed the

demand by the MB, the latter fielded its deputy supreme guide, business tycoon Kheirat al-Shater, as its presidential candidate. This decision by the MB, which had previously said it would not run its own candidate, was criticized by secular forces inside and close to the army, which fear that the Islamists could undercut their own business interests.

The MB controls large portions of the Egyptian economy, and its policies favor attracting foreign investment and privatization. The military, which itself controls large parts of economy, sees the MB as a threat to its own business interests and has warned that it would “fight to defend our projects.”

In a step to contain the Islamists, the SPEC, which is appointed by the junta, disqualified Kheirat al-Shater and the Salafist candidate Hazem Salah Abu Ismail on April 17. The MB accused SCAF of “attempts to recreate the old regime,” and vowed to continue fighting. It fielded a second candidate and called for protests against SCAF to pressure the generals to hand over power.

With the recent crackdown, tensions seem likely to grow. The MB released a statement accusing SCAF of bearing “responsibility for these dead and wounded,” stating that it is not capable of “managing the affairs of the country” and of protecting its citizens. It called on the “nationalist parties, forces and stakeholders [to] unite and close ranks” to protect the revolution “from any counter-coup.”

Essam El-Erian, vice chairman of the FJP and chairman of the People’s Assembly Foreign Affairs Committee, warned against taking the recent events as an “excuse to postpone or cancel the handover of power to civilians.”

At the same time, other political forces are tying themselves more closely to the military. The Salafist Nour Party distanced itself from the disqualified Abu Ismail and did not participate in the protests. It announced that it would not back the MB’s candidate Mohamed Mursi in the elections, but Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh—who was expelled by the MB last year after he announced plans to run for president. Fotouh is also backed by the ultra-right Islamist group al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya.

Islamist candidate Mohamed Selim El-Awa described protesters in front of the ministry of interior as “conspirators” following orders from ousted President

Hosni Mubarak. He stated that the protests were “an attempt to prove that mayhem rules” and denounced insults against the Egyptian army. “Everyone must now focus on the transition of power from the Supreme Council to an elected president,” he declared on TV.

The protests were also opposed by the Nasserist Karama Party and the liberal Free Egyptians Party, founded by business tycoon Naguib Sawiris. In a statement issued on Saturday, the party condemned “attempts to push the country towards bloody confrontations” and “political selfishness that might lead to chaos.”



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