

Mass protest against Mursi set for Egypt's Tahrir Square

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A mass protest will be staged today in Egypt, provoked by President Mohamed Mursi's decree granting himself virtually dictatorial powers. Egypt's Ministry of Education has exempted students from attending class, amid fears of violent confrontations that have been a feature of numerous protests organised by Egypt's main opposition parties and counter-demonstrations by the Muslim Brotherhood since the decree was issued Thursday.

Mursi's opponents are set to march on Tahrir Square, Cairo, where protests have been staged since Friday.

Brotherhood supporters were set to march on Abdeen Square near Tahrir, but the location was changed on Sunday to Nahdet Misr Square, adjacent to Cairo University, in an attempt to avoid a direct confrontation. Late Monday night, the Brotherhood, Egypt's main Islamist Party, called off the demonstration entirely, saying that it was trying "to avoid clashes" and reduce "public tension." Mursi would like to reach a settlement with his rivals within the Egyptian bourgeoisie, despite his recent power grab. The decree has US backing, coming as it did immediately after Mursi and the Muslim Brotherhood proved their reliability to US imperialism during the brutal Israeli assault on Gaza, and in backing Washington's plans for war in Syria and against Iran.

Mursi's decree removes judicial review of his decisions, supposedly until parliamentary elections next year, and shields the Islamist-dominated assembly from legal challenges. The move was a pre-emptive measure against his opponents in the military and the secular parties, after most of the non-Islamist opposition parties withdrew from a panel charged with completing a new constitution.

His attempt at compromise was spurred on by a ten percent plunge on Egypt's stock market Sunday, its first day of opening since the decree was issued, wiping out nearly \$4 billion in value. Only automatic safeguards

prevented a larger fall.

At stake too is the preliminary agreement with the International Monetary Fund over a US\$4.8 billion loan. Scheduled to be passed by December 14, the loan could be put off the agenda as investors flee from renewed political turmoil.

However, Mursi's overriding concern is to prevent an already tense situation escalating into a renewed insurgency on a scale of the one that led to the downfall of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011.

More than 500 people have already been injured in protests, including Gaber Salah of the April 6 movement, who died Sunday of wounds received November 18, and a young member of the Brotherhood, who died in an attack on its Freedom and Justice Party headquarters in the Nile Delta town of Damanhour that saw another 60 injured.

Over the weekend, security forces fired tear gas at tens of thousands of anti-Mursi protesters in the streets surrounding Cairo's Tahrir Square and in front of the parliament building, who chanted, "Leave! Leave!" in an echo of the protests against Mubarak. Demonstrators threw stones and petrol bombs.

Mursi met with senior judges in the Supreme Judiciary Council yesterday to try and reach an accommodation, with both sides making conciliatory noises. The council said Mursi's decree should apply only to "sovereign matters", language that indicates an attempt to modify the decree rather than cancel it. For its part, Mursi's office stressed the temporary nature of the decree. Egypt's justice minister told the press that a resolution was "imminent".

The public posture of the main bourgeois opposition parties has been bellicose, but that does not mean a deal with them can be ruled out either. The underlying fear of all factions of the ruling class is that their conflict will open the way to struggles by the working class that they will be unable to control.

More than 1,000 strikes have taken place in the past two months, the largest wave of industrial action since the fall of Mubarak. This has included action by the nation's 100,000 doctors, who threatened to resign en masse. Indeed, Mursi's main aim in accruing dictatorial powers for himself was to deal with this emerging social movement.

On Saturday, Mohamed ElBaradei of the Constitution Party, who has dubbed Mursi a "new Pharaoh", declared, "There is no room for dialogue when a dictator imposes the most oppressive, abhorrent measures and then says 'let us split the difference.'"

ElBaradei heads the new National Front, formed on Saturday and encompassing his Constitution Party, the Egyptian Popular Current, the Social Democratic Party, the Socialist Popular Alliance Party, Coalition of Nasserist Parties, the Free Egypt Party, the Wafd Party, the Free Egyptians Party, the Farmers General Syndicate, the Independent Farmers Syndicate and others. Representatives of former presidential candidate Abdel-Moneim Abul-Fotouh's Strong Egypt Party are reported to be in discussions over whether to take part. Also in attendance were former Arab League head Amr Mousa, former MP Amr Hamzawy, former Constituent Assembly Spokesperson Wahid Abdel-Meguid, and Mursi's recently resigned Presidential Advisor, Samir Morqos.

Despite public utterances that negotiations are impossible, the National Front and its constituent parties are as keen as Mursi and the Brotherhood to maintain their factional struggle within set limits. To this end, the National Front condemned attacks against the Muslim Brotherhood headquarters and insisted that the revolution must remain peaceful. "There is a good deal of anger, chaos, confusion. Violence is spreading to many places and state authority is starting to erode slowly," warned ElBaradei.

Of the role of the opposition parties, he added, "We hope that we can manage to do a smooth transition without plunging the country into a cycle of violence."

His most ominous remarks concerned the Egyptian military. "I am sure they are as worried as everyone else," he said. "You cannot exclude that the army will intervene to restore law and order."

ElBaradei's invocation of order is a warning of the role the opposition is prepared to play. Mursi represents bourgeois layers with a major stake in Egypt's economy, but which chafe at the military's present domination of as much as 40 percent of the economy. Bourgeois factions represented by ElBaradei and the liberal and secular

nationalist parties already feel squeezed out by the Islamists. If they grow to fear a challenge from below, they will be more than ready to form an alliance with the military junta.

As they did during the movement against Mubarak, the liberals continue to portray the army as a guarantor of the national interest that needs only to be reformed and freed from the influence of the Mubarak-era clique. ElBaradei supported Mursi's August decision to force the defense minister and former interim ruler, Hussein Tantawi, and army Chief of Staff Sami Anan into retirement, portraying this as virtually the end of military rule. In late 2011, he had urged the military to "focus on defending the country". The full import of such statements can now be seen under conditions of mounting unrest.

Over the weekend, there were reports of a group of "army officers" distributing pro-opposition/anti-Mursi leaflets saying, "Legitimacy is on your side. We'll protect [the] homeland with our lives."

The London-based *Al-Quds Al-Arabia* wrote that the leaflets declared, "We swear to Allah that we are not traitors and do not cooperate with anyone's agendas... Egypt is in your hands now... We are not seeking positions or a revolt against legitimacy. We swore to protect the homeland with our lives. Now the legitimacy is on your side."

This same army was busy killing land protesters on November 18, just days before Mursi's declaration was issued. The army fought a four-hour gun battle with protesters in southern Cairo killing three, over a plot of land on Qursayah island owned by the armed forces but seized by local residents following Mubarak's downfall. The military will behave far more ruthlessly towards any movement that goes beyond opposition to the Brotherhood's latest moves and threatens the strategic interests of the bourgeoisie.



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