

Mass protests as Egyptian government seeks to push through constitution

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1 December 2012

Mass protests erupted in Cairo and other Egyptian cities Friday against the efforts of Egyptian President Mohamed Mursi to push through a new antidemocratic constitution.

Tens of thousands gathered in Tahrir Square, where demonstrations that erupted in January 2011 led to the downfall of Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak. Protests were also held in Alexandria, the industrial city of Mahalla and other cities.

Counterdemonstrations have been organized for today by the government and the Muslim Brotherhood. There is the possibility of direct conflict, though the pro-government demonstrations have been moved from Tahrir Square to Cairo University.

The most recent round of mass demonstrations began after Mursi issued a decree on November 22 that gave the president sweeping powers “to take any measures he sees fit in order to preserve and safeguard the revolution, national unity or national security.” The decree also declared that the judiciary, dominated by holdovers from the Mubarak era, would have no oversight on presidential decisions.

The decree gave the constituent assembly—dominated by Mursi’s Muslim Brotherhood—two more months to finish drafting a constitution. However, under conditions of widespread popular protests as well as sharp divisions within the Egyptian ruling class, the assembly decided last week to push through a new constitution as quickly as possible. Mursi is due to sign the constitution as early as today, with a popular referendum to follow within 15 days.

An Associated Press report described the frantic push in the constituent assembly to complete and approve the constitution. The AP wrote: “During Thursday’s session [which lasted for 15 hours], assembly head Hossam al-Ghiryani doggedly pushed the members to

finish. When one article received 16 objections, he pointed out that that would require postponing the vote 48 hours under the body’s rules. ‘Now I’m taking the vote again,’ he said, and all but four members dropped their objections.”

The rush to get a constitution drafted was in part driven by concerns that the Supreme Court might declare the constituent assembly illegal this weekend. A decision against the assembly may still be made. Top judges announced Friday that the judiciary may refuse to monitor the referendum on the constitution, which would place in question its legality.

The main purpose of the new constitution is to solidify the Muslim Brotherhood’s alliance with the military and the United States. This is critical not only in maintaining the Brotherhood’s position in the factional struggle within the Egyptian bourgeoisie, but, more importantly, in crushing growing opposition among workers and youth.

The government is seeking to implement drastic austerity measures in exchange for loan guarantees from the International Monetary Fund and an influx of international capital. On Thursday, government officials pledged that the protests would not impact its determination to impose the measures demanded by the banks.

Mursi has been bolstered by the continued support of the Obama administration. His November 22 decree came one day after US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton praised him for his role in brokering a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. The US sees the Muslim Brotherhood government as a critical component of a network of states led by Sunni Muslim parties (including Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar). This alliance is supporting the US-backed civil war in Syria and will be crucial in any US or Israeli military action

against Iran.

On Friday, the Obama administration pointedly declined to criticize the new constitution or the Mursi regime. The Associated Press reported that while “State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland lamented the lack of consensus,” the “Obama administration is declining to criticize Egypt’s draft constitution despite spirited internal debate over whether the document adequately protects women, religious minorities and dissenting voices.”

Among the list of concerns cited by the AP there is no mention of the role the constitution gives to the military, which remains the dominant institution in Egyptian politics.

The constitution requires that the defense minister be a military officer and that military affairs and the defense budget be overseen by a special council of top generals, along with the president. The military would continue to operate without any constraints or meaningful oversight.

The widely hated military tribunals are also retained. An earlier draft of the constitution contained a provision that would have barred military tribunals for civilians, but it was removed after objections from the military. It was replaced with article 198, which allows for tribunals for “crimes which affect the armed forces.” More than 12,000 civilians have faced military tribunals since the uprising in January 2011.

The constitution also enshrines Islam as the state religion and goes at least partway in making sharia law the basis of legislation. The latter is defined to “include general evidence and foundations, rules and jurisprudence as well as sources accepted by doctrines of Sunni Islam and the majority of Muslim scholars.” A particular role is given to the scholars of Al-Azhar University, an Islamic institute located in Cairo, in overseeing the drafting of legislation.

Among other antidemocratic provisions, the constitution bans “insulting or showing contempt to any individual.” Under Mubarak, many protesters were arrested for insulting the president or making statements that were declared to be antireligious.

The mass protests, including those held on Friday, have been led by factions of the Egyptian political establishment that are no less hostile to the working class than Mursi. Among them are former presidential candidate and former director of the International

Atomic Energy Agency Mohamed ElBaradei and his Constitution Party, Nasserite Hamdeen Sabahi, former Mubarak minister and Arab League general secretary Amr Moussa, and billionaire businessman Naguib Sawiris, founder of the Free Egyptians Party.

The main liberal bourgeois parties have formed an alliance with the April 6 Youth Movement and an array of “left” and pseudo-left parties, including the Revolutionary Socialists, with the aim of containing mass opposition and stabilizing the position of the ruling class.

ElBaradei has warned that “a civil war threatens to erupt in Egypt,” noting that this might lead to the direct intervention of the military.

In an interview last week with the German news magazine *Der Spiegel*, Moussa said that “public opinion has never been as polarized as it is today.” He added, “Some Egyptians believe that the civil war has already begun, but we would like to avoid such a scenario at all costs.”

The actions of Mursi underscore the fact that democratic rights and the social and economic interests of the Egyptian working class and youth cannot be realized within the framework of the bourgeois political establishment and capitalist rule.



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