

Mass protests against referendum on new Egyptian constitution

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Over a hundred thousand people demonstrated in Cairo and tens of thousands more rallied in other Egyptian cities yesterday against a referendum scheduled for December 15 on an Islamist constitution. Championed by President Mohamed Mursi and the Muslim Brotherhood, the new constitution enshrines the authority of the military.

Last weekend, a declaration issued by Mursi affirmed that the vote on the constitution would go ahead.

Protesters in Cairo breached a concrete barrier erected by the army outside the presidential palace. They toppled the concrete blocks with chains while hundreds of soldiers fell back closer to the palace walls. In Alexandria, thousands protested, and rival demonstrations were staged by supporters of Mursi in both cities.

Anti-Mursi protests were also held in Suez, Mahalla and Port Said. Muslim Brotherhood headquarters in Alexandria and Mansoura were ransacked and, in the case of Mansoura, set on fire. The Brotherhood formally requested the military to protect its main headquarters in Cairo.

Fighting raged in Mahalla, a centre of the Egyptian textile industry, between Brotherhood supporters and anti-Mursi protesters, resulting in 300 injuries. There were also clashes in Port Said.

Police repeatedly fired tear gas near Tahrir Square as protesters continued to arrive in large numbers.

The British *Guardian* newspaper quoted Haytham Mohamedeen of the Egyptian Revolutionary Socialists as saying the protests were “to overthrow oppression and stand up to the new dictatorship of Morsi.” While this spokesman of the pseudo-left Revolutionary Socialists stopped short of calling for Mursi’s overthrow, other demonstrators did not. The chant of the 2011 revolution that brought down the US-backed dictator Hosni Mubarak, “The people want to bring down the regime,” resounded in Cairo and other cities, including Alexandria and Suez.

Recent weeks have seen increasingly violent repression carried out jointly by Muslim Brotherhood thugs and the police and security services. Early Tuesday morning, dozens of masked gunmen attacked anti-Mursi protesters in Tahrir

Square, wounding nine with birdshot. Two protesters were wounded in the chest and one in the groin. Petrol bombs were also thrown. Police cars surrounded the square in central Cairo.

Conflicts outside the presidential palace last week led to hundreds of injuries and five deaths, as military-style units of the Brotherhood beat demonstrators and fired shots during 15 hours of street battles. The Associated Press cited reports of 12,000 Mursi supporters attacking a few thousand protesters. A detention facility was set up, under the eye of the police, in a lean-to on the very walls of the palace. Nearly 140 anti-Mursi protesters were detained and tortured to extract false confessions of being paid agents of Israel.

On Monday, a major step towards the formal imposition of military rule was taken when a presidential decree—Law 107—came into effect giving the military authority to arrest civilians and protect “vital facilities of the state” until the result of Saturday’s referendum is known. The decree grants the military “all the authorities of judicial officers,” echoing the provision in Mursi’s constitution allowing for the military trial of civilians for crimes that “harm the Armed Forces.”

Even with military backing, Mursi is in a precarious position given the mounting opposition to his regime. That is why he was forced to temporarily renege on his promise to impose the sweeping spending cuts and tax hikes demanded by the International Monetary Fund in exchange for a \$4.8 billion loan expected December 19 and an additional \$2 billion from the World Bank.

The move will no doubt raise concerns within the United States and other imperialist powers on which Mursi depends no less than he depends upon the Egyptian military.

Mursi and the Brotherhood are considered key allies of Washington in the Middle East, as shown in the role they have already played in Tunisia, Libya and Syria. They are seen to be a key political mechanism for policing and suppressing the working class in Egypt.

A major element of Mursi’s appeal to the United States and other Western powers is his commitment to economic

reforms that will benefit Egypt's global investors. He calls his proposals to encourage private control of the economy, "limit the role of the state" and slash social subsidies his "Renaissance programme."

On Sunday, the first step in this "Renaissance" was announced in the form of a presidential decree imposing tax rises on more than 50 goods, including fuel, electricity, steel, cement, cigarettes and alcohol. But the very next day Mursi suspended the tax increases via a 2 a.m. announcement on his Facebook page in a bid to quell political dissent because, Mursi wrote, he had "felt the pulse of the streets and is aware of how much the Egyptian citizen is burdened in these tough economic times."

On Tuesday, the IMF announced that the planned loan would be delayed for a month, but stressed that this was in response to a request from Egypt. Finance Minister Mumtaz al-Said said the delay, not cancellation, of the "necessary measures" was intended to allow time to explain the bitterly opposed austerity measures to the Egyptian people.

The US has not abandoned Mursi by any means. This week the Obama administration faced off Republicans opposing its intention to honour a US commitment to provide 20 F-16 fighter jets as part of a billion dollar aid package agreed before the downfall of Hosni Mubarak and scheduled for January 2013.

Pentagon spokesperson Col. Wesley Miller said the move was essential given that the US-Egypt defence relationship "has served as the cornerstone of our broader strategic partnership for over thirty years."

State Department official Andrew Shapiro added, "We have continued to rely on Egypt to support and advance US interests in the region, including peace with Israel, confronting Iranian ambitions, interdicting smugglers, and supporting Iraq."

The opposition National Salvation Front, led by bourgeois figures such as Mohamed ElBaradei and Amr Moussa, has declared that it will boycott the vote on the new constitution. But it wants nothing more than an accommodation with the Brotherhood and the military that will ensure that the big business layers for which it speaks will enjoy a position of authority within the state apparatus and a share in the exploitation of the working class.

That is why the Front's official statement complained that Mursi's move would "cause further division and polarisation," rather than stressing its anti-democratic implications. ElBaradei went on TV to urge only that the referendum be postponed for a couple of months.

Even as demonstrators were massing in Tahrir Square and outside the presidential palace, Egyptian news reports began circulating that the army had called for talks between Mursi and the opposition with the aim of ending protests and

ensuring that the referendum proceeds Saturday.

Colonel General Abdel Fattah al-Sissi, defence minister and commander in chief of the armed forces under Egypt's militarist interim constitution, was cited on the military's Facebook page as declaring, "The chief of the military and defence minister calls for a meeting for the sake of Egypt that will bring together national partners in the presence of the president of the republic."

Those urged to attend talks at 4:30 p.m. Wednesday at the Air-Defence Hall in Egypt's Olympic Village in the New Cairo district include the government, judges and "all political forces."

Hamdeen Sabahy of the Nasserist Dignity Party, desiring not to appear to be abandoning opposition to the referendum, raised concerns that without a clear agenda there was a danger the talks would be a public relations exercise. He put off a final decision on attending until today.

At the same time he declared, "The Egyptian army is a great army and highly valued among all Egyptians. We respect it and its efforts."

There was clearly concern that such discussions, under the auspices of the military and just three days before the referendum, would provoke an angry response from the millions of workers and youth opposing Mursi but presently being corralled behind the National Salvation Front. This prompted Egypt's official news agency MENA to stress that the talks would be a non-political "dialogue among all the nation's partners" and "a message to comfort the Egyptian people."



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