

With death toll rising, Egypt's opposition calls for talks with Mursi

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With the death toll in Egypt's nationwide protests having climbed to nearly 60 and the chief of the military issuing a dire warning of a state collapse, the head of the main bourgeois opposition coalition has called for talks with President Mohammed Mursi.

Mohammed ElBaradei, the former United Nations official and leader of the National Salvation Front (NSF), a bloc that includes former members of the dictatorial regime of Hosni Mubarak as well as representatives of Egypt's financial and business sector, made his appeal as the mass protests that have rocked the country headed toward their second week.

"We need an immediate meeting between the president, defense and interior ministers, the ruling party, the Salafis and the National Salvation Front to take urgent steps to halt the violence and start serious dialogue," declared ElBaradei.

Only two days earlier, the leader of the secular and liberal factions of the Egyptian bourgeoisie represented by the NSF had roundly rejected Mursi's own call for a political dialogue, dismissing it as "cosmetic." Then ElBaradei declared, "We will not go to the dialogue today ... We will send a message to the Egyptian people and the president of the republic about what we think are the essentials for dialogue."

He and other NSF leaders issued a series of demands, including the amendment of the constitution passed largely by Mursi's backers in the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and the formation of a "national salvation government."

For its part, the Obama administration seemed to tilt strongly toward Mursi, with a State Department spokeswoman declaring Washington "gratified to see the president and his government renew their call for a national dialogue to avoid further violence" and calling on "all political forces in Egypt to avail themselves of

this opportunity."

While the position of US imperialism no doubt had an influence on the shift in the position by ElBaradei and the NSF, what was happening in Egypt itself was of greater significance. The upheavals continued throughout Egypt, with open defiance by the working class populations in the cities along the Suez Canal—Port Said, Suez and Ismailia—of a state of emergency and 9 pm-to-6 am curfews imposed by the Mursi regime. The Egyptian bourgeoisie as a whole feared the threat of revolution.

Also shifting the political dynamics within Egypt's ruling circles was the intervention of Gen. Abdul Fatah al-Sisi, the defense minister and commander of the military, who warned in a speech to military cadets that the ongoing conflicts in Egypt could "lead to a collapse of the state" and threatened "grave repercussions if the political forces do not act." The statement was widely interpreted as a threat of a military coup.

The mass protests that have swept Egypt began last Friday with demonstrations marking the second anniversary of the Egyptian revolution that toppled US-backed dictator Hosni Mubarak.

The upheavals were further fueled by a court decision in Port Said Saturday sentencing 21 people to death in connection with a deadly football riot there a year ago, which opponents of the then ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) charge was an orchestrated provocation by the security forces. Family members and supporters of the defendants attempted to storm the city's jail, leading to the deaths of at least 32 people.

The state of emergency announced by Mursi Sunday night for the three Canal cities met with massive popular disobedience in Suez, Port Said and Ismailia, with crowds gathering in the centers of the cities, staging football games and even setting off fireworks.

Police and soldiers deployed to the cities looked on without intervening.

On Wednesday, Mursi appeared to bow partially to this mass defiance, announcing that it would be up to the governors of the three areas to determine whether the curfews and emergency measures were necessary. The governors of both Suez and Ismailia responded by cutting the nine-hour curfews to three hours, between 2 am and 5 am.

In Port Said, a meeting called by the governor to consider revising the curfew was broken up Wednesday afternoon after members of the Ultras Green Eagles, the city's hardcore football fans, stormed the capitol building chanting anti-Mursi slogans. They also denounced the governor for ordering police to open up on civilians with live ammunition.

At the same time, violent repression continued. Two more protesters were killed in Cairo on Wednesday, both of them attacked by gangs of plainclothes armed thugs.

Mursi signed into law Wednesday legislation granting the armed forces the power to arrest civilians. While supposedly the military would turn detainees over to civilian courts, there is nothing to stop them from returning to the hated practice under the Mubarak regime of military trials.

The emergency decrees imposed by Mursi in the three Canal cities also give the police power to detain people for 30 days without presenting any charges.

Meanwhile *Egypt Independent* reported that Prime Minister Hesham Qandil met Wednesday with officers of the Central Security Force, Egypt's paramilitary police, promising them "that they would be given the right to enforce the demonstration law, which would allow them to disperse riots gradually, using tear gas first and then live bullets, depending on how dangerous the riots are."

In the midst of the continuing upheavals, Mursi flew to Berlin for meetings with Chancellor Angela Merkel and German investors in an attempt to win support for his regime. The European Union is Egypt's number one trading partner and largest source of foreign investment.

Mursi's government is preparing to resume negotiations with the International Monetary Fund next week over a \$3.8 billion loan to prop up the crisis-ridden Egyptian economy. Growth has slowed to less

than 2 percent, and the country now has barely \$15 billion in foreign reserves, which covers just three months worth of imports.

The Fitch rating agency Wednesday lowered its ratings for Egyptian debt from B+ to B, citing the country's dwindling foreign currency reserves and rising political turmoil.

"Serious divisions have opened within society, contributing to sporadic outbursts of violence," the rating agency said.

The IMF negotiations involve the imposition of further austerity measures and cuts in subsidies under conditions in which rising prices for basic foodstuffs combined with persistent high unemployment is the driving force of the mass upheavals that continue to rock the country nearly a year after the fall of Mubarak.



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