

Deadly clashes erupt across Egypt after Port Said court verdict

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After a controversial verdict on the Port Said football case, protests erupted in Cairo, the Suez Canal city of Port Said and other industrial cities against Egyptian President Mohamed Mursi and the ruling Muslim Brotherhood (MB).

Anger against the regime was fueled by the decision to acquit seven police officers, while confirming the death sentences against 21 El Masry fans first issued on January 26.

The defendants were accused of participating in a state-organized attack on fans of Cairo's Al-Ahly soccer club after a game against Port Said's El-Masry club on February 1, 2012, in which 73 Ahly fans were killed (See: "Mass protests in Egypt against pro-junta football riot"). Only two policemen were convicted: former Port Said security director Essam Samak and the head of the Port Said water bodies' security department, Mohamed Saad. Both received 15 years.

Amid rising mass protests against the verdict, many police are joining the protests, with at least 60 police camps across Egypt on strike Friday. This strike, which reportedly affects a third of Egypt's governorates, began on Tuesday when security forces from Ismailia refused to deploy to Port Said to fight protesters.

Speaking to *Ahram Online*, Port Said police officer Rahid Mohamed Atef suggested that the verdict against El Masry fans lacked any legal foundation. "We didn't know who to arrest—so we arrested anyone who had been in prison before, and people who we were pretty sure might be behind it. There were hundreds arrested, so there may be many people on trial who are innocent."

In Cairo the Al Ahly fan club, the Ultras Ahlawy, set a police station ablaze and torched the premises of the Egyptian Football Association (EFA) in the upscale Zamalek district.

Deadly clashes took place between protesters and police forces on the Qasr al-Nil bridge, a hotspot for protests since the early days of the Egyptian Revolution that toppled dictator Hosni Mubarak in February 2011. Amongst the three killed was an eight-year-old boy. Police also reportedly shot protester Khaled Mustafa in the head from behind as he tried to rescue another injured protester.

On their Facebook page, the Ultras Ahlawy vowed to intensify the protests: "What happened today in Cairo is only the beginning of our rage. Even more of it will surface if all officials involved in the massacre are not put on trial. We will not be placated by the sentencing of just two police 'dogs'."

In Port Said, protesters of the Ultras Green Eagles group tried to block the Suez Canal, the strategic waterway that the Egyptian military tightly controls, unmooring boats to disrupt traffic. Three weeks ago a general strike took place in Port Said. Since then, the city has been paralyzed by ongoing protests. The Islamists have reportedly been driven out of the city, and police have either left the city or refuse to work. The MB's headquarters are abandoned, and Islamist posters have been torn down. Instead, a banner in the city reads: "You [Mursi] are going to jail again."

"The Brotherhood has disappeared," Port Said resident Mahmoud Khalil told AFP. Another protester, Mustafa al-Shan, explained: "We thought they would be different from Mubarak, but we realised they're worse. By escaping from our city during this tribulation, they've forever dropped from our view."

Before the verdict, the city was taken over completely by the military. Egyptian Navy vessels cruised in the Suez Canal. According to *Ahram Online*, an army officer warned protesters that the Sixth Fleet was positioned outside Port Said and was prepared to storm

the city if clashes erupted between protesters and the military.

In an eruption of anger, El Masry fans attacked their own stadium in the city. They demanded the release of their comrades, saying that Mursi is using them as political scapegoats. The Green Eagles Ultras threatened “acts of civil disobedience across Port Said, until our demands are fulfilled... We were persecuted for three decades under Mubarak, and Mursi is continuing this.”

Deputy police chief Mohamed El-Kady criticized the Muslim Brotherhood-run Ministry of the Interior as “worse than Mubarak’s time,” explaining: “The current ministry is asking us to be violent. They should know what the consequences of their actions will be.”

Campaigns for civil disobedience have gathered momentum across Egypt since the mass protests on the second anniversary of the Egyptian Revolution. They have spread to the canal cities of Suez and Ismailia and main industrial cities in the Nile Delta such as Mansoura, Tanta and Mahalla.

Clashes erupted on Mahalla’s main square, El Shoan, after the announcement of the Port Said verdict, with protesters throwing Molotov cocktails at Mahalla’s Second Police Station.

This upsurge of protests against the government is a devastating exposure not only of the Mursi regime, but also of official political opposition forces—from the National Salvation Front to the pseudo-left Revolutionary Socialists. These forces claimed that the aspirations of the revolution could be met by an election that brought the Brotherhood to power. In fact, as the Brotherhood seeks to impose deep social cuts and develops its ties with the army and the security services, the working class is again driven into revolt against the entire political establishment.

As the authority of Mursi and the MB increasingly falls apart, the regime is trying to hold the security forces together, while simultaneously mobilizing far-right, violent Islamist elements to crush strikes and protests.

On Sunday Egypt’s prosecutor-general announced that police and the military would arrest anyone involved in crimes such as the “destruction of public and private property, blocking roads and traffic, and preventing employees from going to work.” The statement also encourages “all citizens” to help the

police and army and “exercise the right afforded them by Article 37 of Egypt’s criminal procedure law to arrest anyone found committing a crime and refer them to official personnel.”

This amounts to calls to the Egyptian ruling elite to create armed militias to assist the police in a violent crackdown. Saber Abul Fotouh, the head of the labor committee of the Freedom and Justice Party, the MB’s political arm, called for “alternative methods to maintain security in the country in light of a recent wave of police strike”.

According to the *Egypt Independent*, “among Abul Fotouh’s suggested methods is a draft law that would allow private security personnel to arrest citizens and hand them over to the prosecutor general, raising fears of laxer laws creating fertile grounds for armed militias.”

Over the weekend the ultra-reactionary Islamist Al-Gamaa Al-Islamiya and the Salafist Nur Party announced plans to create “security militias” and establish “popular committees” to replace striking police forces.

These developments are a stark warning to the working class. Mursi and the MB are seeking to mobilize ultra-right forces to bloodily suppress the working class.



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