

Egyptian military junta issues anti-protest law

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The military junta in Egypt is intensifying its efforts to suppress opposition to its dictatorial rule and reinstate the apparatus of terror that existed prior to the mass revolutionary uprising which toppled former dictator Hosni Mubarak.

On Sunday, Egyptian President Adly Mansour signed a new anti-protest law that effectively “legalizes” the junta’s violent dispersals of protests, sit-ins and strikes and threatens protesters with long jail times and heavy fines.

Human rights activists commented that the law is even stricter than laws under the Mubarak dictatorship or when Egypt was still a British protectorate. Gamal Eid, the director of Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, stated: “This law brings Mubarak’s era back ... It’s weird that the colonialists would have a law that is more just than the supposedly post-revolutionary one.”

Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch (HRW), said the law “would effectively mandate the police to ban all protests outright and to use force to disperse ongoing protests.” It would “severely restrict the freedom of assembly of political parties and nongovernmental groups,” reverse “the few rights protections in the 2012 constitution,” and “truly strangle what’s left of independent political life in Egypt.”

HRW provides an overview of some of the law’s restrictive articles:

-Article 2 enshrines the “right” for police to disperse assemblies.

-Articles 3 and 4 state that the provisions of the law shall apply to any non-political procession or any political protest of more than ten people.

-Article 5 bans public assemblies in places of worship “for any other purpose than prayer.”

-Article 7 says that the right to public assembly does not include sit-ins “impeding the interests of citizens,”

or “influencing the course of justice.”

-Article 8 bans any public meeting, demonstration, or procession of more than ten people without government approval.

-Article 16 bans any protests from taking place within a 100- to 300-meter radius of any government building, legislative council, any police or military building, court, hospital, airport, educational institution, public facility, embassy, museum, or any other place designated by local governors.

-Articles 19, 20 and 22 set out high penalties of up to ten years in prison and fines of up to 500,000 Egyptian pounds (\$72,500) for violating the law.

Essentially the law is a replacement for the notorious emergency law which provided the “legal” basis for the Mubarak dictatorship to crush street protests, sit-ins and strikes and restrict activities of non-governmental and non-approved political organizations.

Following Mubarak’s ouster, various governments—first under the SCAF junta and then under Islamist president Mohamed Mursi—sought to either keep or reinstate the emergency law to suppress continued protests and strikes by workers and youth struggling to achieve their social and democratic demands.

A state of emergency was re-instated on August 14, when the military junta violently crushed two major sit-ins by Islamist opponents of the July 3 military coup, killing and wounding thousands. The emergency finally expired after three months on November 12, but the new law now grants the security forces and secret police even greater powers to suppress opposition.

Immediately after the law was approved, the regime began to enforce it. On Sunday, security forces fired tear gas and dispersed students of Al-Azhar University in Cairo and Assiut University who staged a protest in defiance of the law and chanted slogans against the army and the police. Yesterday, police forces fired

water cannons to disperse two protests by dozens of anti-government activists in downtown Cairo.

Major General Abdel Fattah Othman, the head of the ministry's general administration for media and public relations, warned that defiance of the law would not be tolerated. He denounced the protests: "This behavior is a challenge to the state and its prestige. The protesters want to embarrass the state. But the state is capable ... Any gathering without a permit will be dealt with according to the law."

The military regime in Egypt could hardly state its counterrevolutionary character more clearly. It is now banning precisely the type of mass protests which led to Mubarak's ouster in early 2011 and to the mass protests against Mursi, which the military seized upon to stage the July 3 military coup.

The anti-protest law underscores also the counter-revolutionary role of the pseudo-left and liberal organizations, which consciously channeled the June 30 mass protests against Mursi and the MB behind the army in order to pre-empt a social revolution.

The military coup did not constitute a "second revolution" against the reactionary Muslim Brotherhood as forces like the Tamarod campaign, the liberal and Nasserite parties of the National Salvation Front (NSF), or pseudo-left groups like the Revolutionary Socialists (RS) proclaimed. It paved the way for the return a full scale military-police state, which aims to intensify a crackdown not only on its Islamist rivals in the Egyptian bourgeoisie but on the working class—the main force behind the revolution.

Recent weeks have witnessed an increasing wave of strikes amongst sections of the working class who have been at the forefront of the revolution from the start. In early October, thousands of workers at the state-run Mahalla Weaving and Textile Company mounted a three-day strike to demand a promised profit-sharing bonus. The strike was followed by a sit-in of 12,000 textile workers from the Kafr El-Dawar Spinning and Weaving Companies to protest lack of payment.

While the military regime first issued assurances that it would pay the textile workers, it is now increasingly resorting to violence to put down protests and strikes and prepare fresh attacks against the working class. Last Saturday, security forces dispersed a sit-in in the Gharbiya governorate by workers of the Samanoud Felt Fabric Company, who blocked railway tracks between

Tanta and Mansoura for several hours to demand payment of back wages and better working conditions.

Shortly after Mansour signed the anti-protest law, Interim Prime minister Hazem al-Beblawi made clear that the regime is preparing for a major confrontation with the working class. In an interview with AFP, he announced that his government will begin to cut subsidies to critical mass consumption items before leaving office next year.

"It is unsustainable, the kind of subsidies we are incurring," he said. "It is not only high but it is increasing. We have to face it squarely and make drastic decisions."

As the Egyptian Revolution is approaching its third anniversary once again major class confrontations loom at the horizon.

In a country where over 40 percent of the population lives on less than \$2 dollar a day, millions of workers and rural and urban poor are dependent on vital bread and fuel subsidies. The IMF has been demanding for long that Egypt cut its subsidies, but various Egyptian governments have shied away in the past out of fear of igniting another revolutionary wave. The last time the IMF and the Egyptian regime cut subsidies, in 1977, country-wide "bread riots" erupted and the army had to intervene to put down the uprising.



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