Military junta implements reign of terror in Egypt

Jean Shaoul
16 April 2014

The military junta is institutionalising a reign of terror in Egypt, sweeping away what little remains of democratic and political rights.

Stepping up its crackdown on dissent, it has approved a new anti-terrorism law that includes widening the definition of terrorism and terrorist "crimes", tougher sentences for those convicted of terrorism, including the death sentence for those convicted of establishing or joining a "terrorist organisation", and greater powers for security and intelligence forces. The law will take effect after interim President Adly Mansour ratifies it.

The new law is ostensibly aimed at crushing protests by the supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and the jailed former MB President Mohammed Mursi who is now facing a barrage of charges that carry the death penalty. The MB, the main bourgeois political opposition to the military dictatorship, was banned under the new constitution and declared a terrorist organisation last December.

This follows the unleashing of unprecedented violence against the MB leadership and its supporters. Since seizing power in a coup last July, some 3,000 have been killed, of whom 1,000 were killed on one day alone, and more than 16,000 arrested.

Last December, the junta introduced a new constitution that consolidated the power and privileges of the military, which has been the dominant political force since the Free Officers coup led by Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1952. In effect, the constitution enshrines the military as the bulwark of the bourgeois state in Egypt. The new constitution strengthens the security and intelligence apparatus, and requires the state and its institutions to fight "terrorism".

Presidential candidate and organiser of last July's military coup, army chief and former defence minister Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, has appointed a low-ranking general and crony, his son's father-in-law Mahmoud Hegazy, as army chief of staff to head the 450,000-strong military, and established "anti-terror units" with sweeping powers.

Al-Sisi is expected to win elections scheduled for May 26-27, albeit on a low poll. According to the pollster Baseera, just 39 percent of respondents said they would vote for him.

Last month, a kangaroo court in Minya issued an unprecedentedly harsh ruling after just two brief hearings, sentencing 529 MB members to death for killing a policeman. This is part of the junta's broader attempt to terrorise popular opposition to its rule. In another mass trial, 683 MB supporters, including the MB's Supreme Guide Mohamed Badie, and the leader of its political arm, Saad Katatni, face similar charges.

The new law also targets jihadi militant groups hostile to the MB that have attacked and killed tourists in the Sinai Peninsula in an effort to disrupt the already weakened economy.

Since last August, Sinai has been under virtual military lockdown as the army seeks to root out the jihadists. Mobile phone networks and the internet are out of action from 7am to 6pm on a daily basis, making it impossible to carry out normal business activities, such as bank transactions, and access government services.

A local journalist cited by the web site *Al-Monitor* said the army had violated the rights of innocent citizens, destroying houses, levelling plots of land and arresting dozens without any evidence of wrongdoing. People were afraid to speak out against these abuses for fear that they, their families or friends will be arrested and beaten by the security forces and their homes destroyed. None of this is widely known as there is a media blackout on Sinai.

The crushing of dissent extends beyond the MB and jihadi militants to secular opponents in other political organisations. A court in Cairo recently upheld the sentencing of three prominent activists for three years for organising an unauthorised demonstration under

© World Socialist Web Site

legislation passed last November severely restricting the freedom of assembly.

The anti-protest law is even stricter than those of the Mubarak era or when Egypt was still a British protectorate. It essentially replaces the notorious emergency laws through which the Mubarak dictatorship crushed street protests, sit-ins and strikes, and restricted political activity.

The authorities have detained nearly 1,100 people under this new law since the demonstrations held earlier this year to mark the third anniversary of the January 25 revolution. Some are being held indefinitely through the renewal of the 15-day pre-trial detention period.

Two of the activists are founding members of the April 6 youth movement and the other is a member of the Egyptian Popular Current, the political group founded by presidential candidate Hamdeen Sabahi. All three were prominent in the movement that backed the military against the Mursi government last July.

Another court has sentenced four men to up to eight years in jail under legislation banning debauchery for homosexual acts. It echoes the mass trial in 2001 of 52 men accused of homosexual offences. In that case, 23 of the men were sentenced to jail with hard labour for up to five years.

Three journalists from al-Jazeera's English news channel are on trial as part of a sweeping crackdown on freedom of speech. They face charges including broadcasting false news, aiding or joining a terrorist organisation, namely the Muslim Brotherhood, and endangering national security. If convicted, they could be sentenced to several years in jail.

The military junta fears, with every justification, another mass eruption by Egypt's restive youth and workers over the ever increasing poverty, the lack of affordable housing, almost weekly building collapses, power outages, injustice and corruption.

Thousands of workers have rallied and gone on strike for higher wages, better working conditions and a higher minimum wage in recent weeks, crippling the critical industrial zone and maritime hub in Suez, postal service, textile industry and public hospitals.

Last January, then-Prime Minister Hazem Beblawi reneged on the government's promise to raise civil servants' minimum monthly salary from $100 to about $172, and instead gave just one-third a pay rise.

This is under conditions where more than 25 percent of Egyptians live below the national poverty line of about $570 a month, according to CAPMAS, the official statistics agency. Prices of basic goods have soared, due to inflation, a plummeting currency and depleted currency reserves. At the same time, co-payments and fees for public goods and services have risen, some of which never materialise. Egypt has experienced the largest fall in the global "happiness index", more even than Greece, between 2006 and 2012.

The strikes have been met with brutality and mass arrests. Last August, the military police stormed a sit-in at the Suez Steel Company. In March, five leaders of the postal workers strike were arrested at their homes in dawn raids in the coastal city of Alexandria.

In another struggle at a factory owned by Cleopatra Ceramics, the international ceramics producer, over the implementation of a 2012 agreement for higher wages, overtime pay and food allowances, the factory owner sought help from the military, claiming that the workforce belonged to the Brotherhood. A senior army commander then removed the union leadership with threats and intimidation of the workers and their families. General Mohamed Shams called 23 of the union's leaders to the army headquarters in Suez and threatened to have them investigated for terrorism by the secret police if they refused to sign resignation letters and leave the company.

None of this could have been carried out without the pseudo-left and liberal organizations, which consciously channelled the June 30 mass protests against Mursi and the MB behind the army in order to pre-empt a mass uprising by the working class and youth.

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.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site