Egyptian regime imposes death penalties on nearly 200

Mike Head
4 December 2014

Confident of the backing of the US and its allies, the Egyptian military regime presided over the sentencing of almost 200 people to death in a single mass trial on Tuesday.

This is the third mass sentencing since April, ostensibly for the killing of a few police officers in riots. It comes amidst mounting repression by the junta headed by President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi designed to intimidate and terrorise the Egyptian working class. As a result of these three show trials alone, 1,397 people have been sentenced to death.

The verdict was another declaration by Egyptian authorities of their intent to crush all resistance to the military dictatorship. They are reprising the methods employed by ex-President Hosni Mubarak's dictatorship, whose courts sentenced an estimated 709 people to death between 1981 and 2000, of whom at least 248 were executed.

A judge handed down the 185 death sentences just days after a Cairo court on Saturday cited a procedural technicality to dismiss charges against Mubarak. The former US-supported dictator was accused of overseeing the killing of 846 unarmed demonstrators and the wounding of 6,000 by police snipers and thugs during the first stage of the Egyptian revolution in early 2011.

The timing of the two verdicts underscored the regime's use of the courts to prosecute its agenda. The latest trial, like the two previous large-scale sentencings, was another mockery of justice.

In all, 188 prisoners were charged with being supporters of the banned Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and accused of killing 11 police officers during an attack on a police station in the town of Kardasa in August 2013. Two of the defendants died during their imprisonment, and one was ineligible for the death penalty because he is a minor, a defence lawyer told the *New York Times*.

According to the same report, there was no effort to prove that individual defendants personally killed any of the officers. More than 100 of the accused were not allowed to have lawyers. Scores of defence witnesses were excluded from the courtroom. About 50 of the defendants were not even present—they were convicted in absentia.

In addition to the previous large-scale trials in April—one involving 529 prisoners, the other 683—the regime's courts have handed down many death penalties to smaller groups of MB supporters around Egypt.

Tuesday's ruling arose out of riots and attacks on police stations after the regime's security forces, on August 14, 2013, massacred almost 1,000 people camped out in Cairo's Rabaa al-Adawiya Square. Those murdered by security forces were supporters of Mohamed Morsi, the elected president ousted by the military's July 2013 coup.

The *New York Times* reported that appeals are continuing in the previous death sentence cases, and claimed, "It is unlikely that any of the death sentences for political violence last year have been carried out or will be anytime soon."

Such assurances are false. Anti-death penalty groups report that at least nine people have been hanged in Egypt since June—the first capital punishments to be carried out since October 2011. Although none of these executions was reportedly a political case, they set a clear precedent.

Since the army deposed Morsi last year, at least 1,400 of his supporters and others already have been killed in crackdowns on protests against the military takeover. Some 22,000 people have been arrested, including most

© World Socialist Web Site

of the MB's top leaders. Thousands remain imprisoned without charge for political reasons, many of them held in clandestine torture centres.

While this repression is directed, in the first instance, against the MB, it has a wider target—the Egyptian working class, which has risen up twice since 2011, first against Mubarak and then against Morsi. In order to suppress coverage of the regime's police-state methods, the media has also been targeted.

The same judge who handed down the latest death penalties, Mohammed Nagi Shehata, recently sentenced three Al Jazeera journalists to at least seven years imprisonment for allegedly conspiring with the MB to broadcast false news and destabilise Egypt. This was despite the lack of any evidence whatsoever that they collaborated with the MB or made misleading reports.

Just as Washington backed Mubarak's repression from 1981 to 2011 so the latest court decisions could not have occurred without the support of the Obama administration. The White House made no statement on the latest death sentences, and the US State Department refused to comment on Mubarak's acquittal, instead referring journalists to the Egyptian government itself.

As al-Sisi's junta has become ever-more brutal, the Obama administration has increasingly embraced it. After initially referring to the possibility of cutting off aid to Egypt after the military coup, as required by US law, the White House ensured the continuation of the $1.5 billion annual flow, most of it in military aid.

This April, following the previous mass death sentences, US Secretary of State John Kerry, welcomed his Egyptian counterpart, Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy, to Washington. Kerry stated that Egypt is "a very important strategic partner" of the US and praised the regime for its "positive steps" toward democracy.

Following meetings in September between al-Sisi and Bill and Hillary Clinton, the ex-US president and secretary of state, and then former secretaries of state Henry Kissinger and Madeleine Albright, President Barack Obama himself held talks with the dictator, declaring that "the US-Egyptian relationship has been an important cornerstone of our security policy and our policy in the Middle East for a very long time."

Buoyed by these endorsements, al-Sisi went further. He issued decrees to consolidate the military's power, including by restoring military trials for anyone accused of attacking key public facilities, such as power stations, the electricity distribution network, pipelines, oil and gas installations and the transport network, which are now all under army guard.

Throughout every phase of the Egyptian revolution that toppled Mubarak in February 2011, the US-backed military has focused its fire on stifling dissent and preventing a politically independent uprising by the working class. Having initially acceded to Mubarak's ouster to head off the working class, the generals worked closely with the MB after Morsi took office in June 2012 to contain the revolution.

The liberal and pseudo-left organisations then channelled the mass workers' strikes and protests against Morsi and the MB back behind the army, claiming that its July 2013 coup was part of a "second revolution." As the death penalties handed out Tuesday once again confirm, the rise of al-Sisi has marked the return of all the brutal methods of the Mubarak dictatorship.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site