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Egypt

Egypt's revolution returns to the streets

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A police attack on a small sit-in by 100 protesters in Tahrir Square November 19 has turned into a massive challenge to Egypt's military rulers as hundreds of thousands of demonstrators flooded the streets of Cairo and other cities to demand the ouster of the military regime.

The mobilization—which began just a week before scheduled elections for a body to write a new constitution—was on par with the mass protests of January and February that brought down the U.S.-backed regime of Hosni Mubarak.

After days of brutal attacks on demonstrators by the Central Security Forces and military police that left at least 33 dead, Egypt's de facto ruler, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, promised a transition to an elected civilian president by July, about six months earlier than originally proposed.

The military regime that has ruled Egypt since Mubarak's downfall, led by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), also made other concessions, including an order banning former members of Mubarak's National Democratic Party from participating in politics for five years. Meanwhile, the civilian government, led by Prime Minister Essam Sharaf, resigned on November 21 under pressure from the mass movement.

However, Tantawi refused to withdraw a plan to impose a constitution that would give the military control over its own budget and ensure that the generals remain the ultimate arbitrators of politics. That stance only further antagonized protesters, who are arguing that the military rulers must go immediately.

Mostafa Omar, a member of Egypt's Revolutionary Socialists and journalist for Ahrim Online, spoke with Lee Sustar about the dynamics of the movement and the prospects for the renewal of Egypt's revolutionary movement.

LS: What was the trigger for this latest crisis in Egypt?

MO: The trigger was an incident last Saturday, November 19, when the police went to break up a sit-in of no more than 100 people on the center traffic island of Tahrir Square. Most of them had been injured in the January 25 uprising that led to the overthrow of Mubarak.

The sit-in followed a big march the day before that was dominated by the Islamists, demanding that the Supreme Council hand over power to a civilian administration by the end of April 2012. The day went just fine. But one Islamist leader, a conservative Salafist, called off his plan for a sit-in and left with his supporters, so just 100 people were there overnight. Police came the following morning and began brutalizing them, and ejected them from the square.

But thousands responded to this repression by coming to the square to reclaim it. By the next day, there were tens of thousands of people in Tahrir Square again, and they kicked the police out. This is what started the showdown in the immediate sense.

The second factor is that there have been a number of protests against military rule and military trials of civilians taking place steadily over course of the last three weeks. They weren't massive—2,000 to 5,000 people at each point. But they were picking up steam, indicative that something bigger might happen.

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In recent weeks, there has been a growing sense of confidence among families of those in military jails and activists who have been fighting military trials. You can look back on it and see that there was a readiness to go into the squareâ€”to fight the police and reclaim Tahrir Square.

The underlying reason is that the government and the SCAF have failed miserably in bringing about any economic or social reform that would improve peoples' lives in last nine months. They failed to raise the minimum wage, as they promised in March, and they failed to institute any system of price controls over basic foodstuffs.

In fact, for the last five months, the SCAF has decided that not only will it refuse to make serious economic concessions, but it would slowly bring back the entire repressive machine of Mubarak. Its leaders have been attempting to rebuild the confidence of the police for months. The Central Security Forces, the main repressive part of the police, have been let loose on strikers, people sitting in, etc.

So instead of carrying out any meaningful reforms, the SCAF decided that it would crack down on protests, demonstrations and strikes. And while it promised that it wouldn't allow Mubarak's NDP to run in the elections as a party, NDP members formed eight new parties. In other words, the SCAF was re-engineering the political scene with all the old NDP people, who were going to make it back into parliament.

LS: What was the popular reaction to all this?

MO: A majority of those in streets today probably supported the SCAF in February and believed that it would take side of the people and dismantle the Mubarak regime. It has taken nine months of disappointments in the regime's economic policies and increasing repression to change that. A lot of young people and a lot of workers who believed in the SCAF have undergone a process of a change in consciousness since February.

There is another reason for popular anger, which is that the liberal and Islamist parties seemed to be looking for ways to share power with the NDP and SCAF through parliament and the presidential elections.

So consciousness was changing under the surface, but people lacked the confidence to fight back. But all of a sudden, unexpectedly, waves and waves of people have come out of months of silence. Demoralization has suddenly it turned into its opposite.

LS: What is the attitude of the Islamist parties toward the government and the SCAF? How have they responded to the mobilization?

MO: Islamist groups have supported the SCAF and said effectively that they won't criticize the army and the military council. The Muslim Brotherhood in particular has intervened in many social struggles to contain themâ€”and in strikes, to break them. The Brotherhood tried to break two doctors' strikes over the spring and summer. It has been 100 percent behind military council.

But then the military announced that it would control the process of writing a new constitution, have veto power over any legislation that has to do with the army, and its budget would remain secret. The debate over this lasted a whole month, creating a fissure between the army and the Islamists.

For their part, the Islamists were afraid that the army would prevent them from placing religious clauses in the constitution allowing for Islamist jurisprudenceâ€”sharia law. That was the reason for the protest on Friday, November 19â€”it was the Muslim Brotherhood's attempt to pressure the SCAF into allowing sharia into the

constitution.

On Friday, the Islamists demanded that the SCAF hand over power to a civilian administration by April. By Tuesday, the chant in Tahrir Square was "The people want the field marshal's out immediately." Plus, there is anger at the leaders of the Islamist movement. One of them—a presidential candidate—was beaten up in the square. Another, the number two figure in the Muslim Brotherhood, was chased out of Tahrir.

So what we have is a new mass movement—and it all happened within 72 hours. It's really driving a wedge between thousands of young Muslim Brotherhood supporters and the leadership of the organization. Many of young supporters have joined the protests against the orders and the wishes of that leadership.

So there are liberals, independents, leftists and Islamists in the square. This is creating divisions within the Islamist bloc. Their poorer and working class members feel they must come down to defend Tahrir Square against police brutality. There were up to a million people on the streets on Tuesday, November 22, and tens of thousands more across the country, all on less than 48 hours' notice.

LS: What has been the role of the U.S. in this crisis?

MO: U.S. Officials have said that they have been in constant contact and negotiations with the Muslim Brotherhood. They've said they were preparing for a coalition government of the Muslim Brotherhood, former members of the NDP and some liberals. The elections were seemingly set up to bring in a parliament almost identical to Mubarak's last one. The U.S. and the SCAF seemed confident that they had been able to stabilize the situation—that they had pulled the rug from beneath the revolutionary movement.

That's why police cracked down on the Saturday sit-in—just as they had done with many previous ones. Break some heads, break some bones, and that would be it—that was the thinking. They didn't expect the flood of anger and a willingness to fight.

It looked like the Islamists were ready to form a government with the agreement of the SCAF. But now the whole balance of forces has changed. It took 48 hours for the movement to win one demand that has gone unmet for nine months—a ban on NDP members from participating in parliament for five years, even though many of them are candidates for the election to be held in less than a week.

More significantly, the SCAF said it would stop investigating crimes committed by the military police and instead refer all accusations to civilian prosecutors. This has been a key demand since October 9, when military police massacred civilian police during a protest by Coptic Christians.

LS: How have the demonstrators been able to occupy Tahrir Square despite the repression?

MO: As we speak on Tuesday, November 22, there are a million people in Tahrir Square in a peaceful demonstration. But the side streets have witnessed a round-the-clock battle for 72 hours.

One street off of Tahrir Square near the old American University campus looks like a battlefield from the First World War. Thousands of police are trying to defend the Interior Ministry's headquarters. They have fired teargas into the crowd every five minutes for four days straight, thanks to an endless supply of from the U.S.. They're also firing rubber bullets.

But this isn't the usual police brutality. After the first police attack on Saturday morning, they came again on Sunday at 5 p.m., when there were 30,000 or 40,000 people in Tahrir. But this time, they came with military police, and that's when the massacre began. People were killed by rubber bullets and live ammunition. This was the result of a shoot-to-kill policy by snipers and the Central Security Forces—doctors said injuries were concentrated around the neck and head.

After people were killed, the police lined up their bodies on the sidewalk. They dragged one of the bodies a dozen yards and dumped it into a big garbage can. At another point, they were hitting bodies on the head with clubs to make sure they were dead—people say this is worse than the days of Mubarak.

The military's behavior shifted public opinion—it shocked people who believed that the worst days of Mubarak were behind them. They might not have liked the SCAF, but they thought at least it wasn't as bad as Mubarak. Now people say, "We don't have one Mubarak, we have 16 Mubaraks"—a reference to the number of people on the military council.

LS: What is the social composition of the protesters in Tahrir Square?

MO: It is very similar to what it was in January and February, but less middle class and more working class. Most people who died at the hands of police are poor, young working class people who have come from the shantytowns—young people who have no hope after years of neglect.

One of those killed was helping a young woman who was breaking stones to throw at police. He said to her, "I'm uneducated, I have no future. The police will kill me someday anyway. I will die here—you go. You are educated, you will help the movement."

If this mobilization continues, you can expect more young Muslim Brotherhood supporters and Salafists to join in. Most of the doctors who are treating the wounded are Muslim Brotherhood supporters who say that they have come on their own because of their conscience.

LS: Some have raised the possibility of a general strike as the next step in the struggle. Are we close to that?

MO: In September we came close to a general strike situation when there was a national strike of teachers—the first since 1951—a strike of bus drivers in Cairo for almost 20 days and two big national strikes by government doctors. At least three-quarters of a million workers in key sectors of economy were on strike at some point in September. A lot of people on the left thought a general strike could happen then.

Those strikes didn't lose, but they didn't win, either. That was demoralizing for a lot of people. Workers are not well enough organized to deal with the SCAF. Today, if you strike, it isn't the police, but the army who comes in to break or contain your strike.

Today, there aren't any massive strikes, but there are a lot of strikes all the time. And there is no doubt that the last 72 hours will give people confidence to take on the SCAF. The number of independent unions has jumped from about 90 in the early summer to 250 today. But while there are lots of unions, there is no political organization for workers in the country.

LS: What's next? Can the elections be held as planned?

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MO: The last five months have been a period of ebb in the revolutionary momentum, despite the strikes, and the near-general strike in September. The SCAF had the upper hand, and there was mass demoralization. But all of a sudden, the situation has changed.

Can they hold an election in five days? The battle is still going on. But it is already a big victory that the government of Essam Sharaf has fallen. Sharaf promised to be the prime minister of Tahrir Square, but he brought people from Mubarak's NDP into all but three or four positions.

Right now, the demand of the movement is for a unity government with no NDP people. The negotiations are for a new government that will have Islamists, liberals and maybe even people from the left.

This new government will take over in very different conditions. People are saying that when we put in the Sharaf government in March, we gave them a blank check, and they stole the revolution. This time, we will hold them accountable.

This isn't just a demonstration against the SCAF. All this is taking place with a much higher level of consciousness.

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