

Egyptian Junta Launches Crackdown on Protests Commemorating 1973 War

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On Sunday, for the 40th anniversary of the beginning of the 1973 October War between Israel and a coalition of Arab states, the military-backed interim government and the Muslim Brotherhood-led Anti-Coup Alliance called for rival protests across Egypt.

At least 49 anti-regime protesters were killed and hundreds injured and arrested in protests over the weekend. On Friday, four people had reportedly been shot dead in the southern city of Assiut and another one in the capital, Cairo. On Sunday, at least 44 protesters were killed by security forces working together with armed thugs. According to the Egyptian health ministry, 32 people were killed in Cairo, four in Beni Suef, and two in Delga and in Minya. Eight more deaths were as yet unaccounted for.

The interior ministry claimed that 423 supporters of former president Mohamed Mursi were arrested while trying to “storm Egyptian public squares.”

Cairo and other Egyptian cities resembled armed camps, with military helicopters hovering in the air and army tanks and infantry units on the ground. Streets were barricaded and highways reinforced by army checkpoints. Symbolizing the repressive character of the junta of General Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, Tahrir Square, the iconic center of the Egyptian Revolution, was surrounded by tanks, its entrances patrolled by soldiers and Egypt’s notorious Central Security Forces.

Anti-regime protests were organized by the Muslim Brotherhood-led Anti-Coup Alliance, which has regularly called protests since Mursi’s ouster in a July 3 military coup. Despite a bloody crackdown on the MB—thousands of whose members have been killed or arrested since the coup—the largest Islamist organization in Egypt can still mobilize thousands of its members. However, its protests apparently did not gain broader support from Egypt’s working masses.

While the Brotherhood still demands Mursi’s reinstatement as president, it combined its protest call with an appeal to the military signaling the possibility of future reconciliation talks. In its official statement, the Anti-Coup Alliance called on its supporters “to celebrate that victory’s army and leaders” and asked the army to “go back to its true fighting doctrine.”

Military and security forces brutally prevented pro-MB protesters from reaching Tahrir Square using armored vehicles, tear gas and live ammunition.

Official celebrations organized by the junta on Tahrir Square and before the presidential palace in Cairo received less support, not exceeding a few thousand participants. This

explodes the big lie promoted by the junta and its liberal and pseudo-left supporters that there is mass popular support for renewed military rule in Egypt.

On the contrary, there are increasing signs that under the Sisi dictatorship, Egypt is heading towards major social upheaval.

After the junta brutally suppressed two major strikes at Suez Steel and the Scimitar Petroleum Company in August, it is now desperately seeking to curb growing social discontent with populist gestures.

Interim Prime Minister Hazem el-Beblawi's promised to increase the minimum wage for government staff from 700 Egyptian pounds (100 \$US) to 1,200 next year. The government also announced it would accept a court order to renationalize two companies that were privatized under ousted dictator Hosni Mubarak. The military also reportedly distributed food in several governorates to boost its image before Armed Forces Day.

At the same time, the junta and its allies stepped up their nationalist propaganda to delegitimize protests and provide the military a cover to intensify the suppression of protests against its rule.

In a speech on state television on Saturday, Egypt's interim President Adly Mansour called on all Egyptians to go to "every district, street and square of Egypt to celebrate your victory and support your army." Presidential spokesman Ahmed al-Muslimani stated that "protesters against the army on the anniversary of [October 6] victory will be carrying out the duties of agents, not activists."

Hassan Shahin, the spokesperson of the Tamarod campaign—which played the central role in channeling the mass working class protests against Mursi behind the military before the July 3 coup—stressed in a press conference that they back the army and police in their "war against terrorism." He promised that "those who came down on 30 June and imposed their will on everybody and defended it will come down tomorrow to the squares to celebrate with the army."

Shahin claimed that the 1973 war saw Egypt fight off the "Zionist enemy," comparing Israel's "terrorism" to the Muslim Brotherhood. "We live under the same terror from an internal enemy called the Muslim Brotherhood that is supported by the American and Zionist enemies," he said. "Anyone who stands against the celebrations of October is outside the context of Egyptian nationalism and is considered a Zionist enemy."

The attempt by the junta and its petty-bourgeois supporters to portray themselves as a national, even anti-imperialist, force is a farce. All the factions of the Egyptian bourgeoisie are bound by a thousand threads to imperialism and defend the same fundamental class interests. The Egyptian military is financed by the US and has continued the basic policies of the Mursi regime, which was also backed by Washington prior to the coup.

While Washington canceled joint military exercises with the Egyptian army and halted delivery of four F-16 fighter jets immediately after the junta's massacre of thousands of MB supporters on August 14, it is now resuming its military cooperation.

On Thursday, Egypt's army chief of staff Lieutenant General Sedki Sobhi met with Lieutenant General James L. Terry, head of the infantry forces in the US Central Command.

According to Egypt's MENA state news agency, the two military leaders discussed bilateral cooperation and joint military exercises between the Egyptian and the US armies.

In the meanwhile the Egyptian military continues its so-called offensive against "terrorism" on the Sinai. On Sunday it reportedly killed four gunmen near a checkpoint on the Cairo-Ismailia road. The army has killed around 100 alleged Islamists on the Sinai over the past two months, in what officials described as the largest mobilization of force in the area since the 1973 war.

The offensive is closely coordinated with Israel, which now regards the Egyptian army as a partner in sealing off the Gaza strip and maintaining the oppression of the Palestinian people.

The real alignment of forces and the official propaganda surrounding the anniversary of the October War exposes the class character of the entire Egyptian bourgeoisie—be it the military, the Islamists or the liberal and petty-bourgeois left forces. It was precisely the October War which paved the way for the Egyptian ruling class to enter into an alliance with US imperialism and Israel abroad and intensify the attacks on the working class at home.

As Egyptian scholar Naadia Ramsis Farah noted in a 2009 study: "For Egypt to broker an understanding with the west, and especially with the United States, Sadat opted for a limited war in 1973 to bring the issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict to the international agenda and to raise options for settlement of the conflict. One year later, President Sadat declared an Open Door (liberalization) economic policy."

All the bitter experiences since and especially throughout the mass revolutionary struggles in the past two and a half years have vindicated the perspective that only the working class can lead a struggle against imperialism and for democratic and social rights in Egypt and the Middle East.

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