

Police crackdown against protests in Egypt, Oman

By Patrick Martin
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Egyptian military police attacked and beat protesters Saturday in Tahrir Square, the focal point of the mass popular movement that forced the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak two weeks ago. The incident was part of a wave of repression by security forces throughout the Middle East, as monarchies and military regimes struck back in the wake of Friday's huge anti-government demonstrations.

After the largest demonstration in Cairo since the ouster of Mubarak, with tens of thousands thronging Tahrir Square, several hundred protesters tried to spend the night outside the cabinet office there, defying the official midnight curfew.

They were sending the message that the January 25 revolution—named after the day the protests began—has not been completed, given that Mubarak's cronies in the military and civilian leadership still hold all the levers of power. One of their principal demands was for the resignation of Prime Minister Ahmad Shafiq, one of the top holdovers from the Mubarak regime.

A squadron of masked military police moved in to evict the protesters using tasers, firing shots in the air, beating many of the youth and arresting dozens. Fighting continued over the next six hours, as the protesters were driven out of Tahrir Square, later regrouping and returning.

Dina Abouelsoud, 35, told the *Washington Post*, "All of a sudden the police came in wearing masks like socks. You couldn't see anything except for eyes. They did not talk or anything. They just started grabbing people and throwing them backward.... They were taking cameras from people. I saw people on the floor."

Activists accused the military of behaving the same as the state security police, the principal enforcer of the Mubarak dictatorship. It is the first time that the military has directly attacked protesters in central

Cairo, although there have been widespread reports of military violence against oppositionists, including mass arrests, beatings and torture, outside the media spotlight on Tahrir Square.

The Supreme Council of Armed Forces issued a statement through the state news agency Mena, claiming that the attack on demonstrators was "an unintentional result of friction between military police and the sons of the revolution and that there has not been and will not be any orders given." The military council claimed that it had taken steps to ensure there would be no repetition of the attack.

But the event is already undermining illusions in the military. One demonstrator, Saleh Gamal, told the *Washington Post*, "There is no trust in the military in my mind. After what happened last night, you can tell they are not loyal to the people." Gamal was tasered and temporarily paralyzed.

Another demonstrator, Ashraf Omar told the press, "I am one of the thousands of people who stood their ground after the army started dispersing the protesters, shooting live bullets into the air to scare them. There is no more unity between the people and the army. I thought things would change. I wanted to give the government a chance, but there is no hope with this regime. There is no use. I am back on the street. I either live with dignity or I die here."

Other large demonstrations were continuing in Ismailia, Arish, Suez and Port Said, as well as strikes that have shut down or disrupted large sections of industry and transport.

Other protests took place in southern Egypt, where villagers blocked a highway in Assiut province using burning tires and set fire to three government buildings, in a protest against official corruption. Two thousand government workers have gone on strike in the same

province over similar complaints.

Meanwhile, the ongoing upheaval in the Persian Gulf has spread to Oman, where two people were killed Sunday after police opened fire on demonstrators demanding democratic rights, a functioning parliament and jobs in the sheikdom's largest industrial city, Sohar. The two days of protests in Sohar followed last week's demonstration in the capital city, Muscat, the first such incident in the recent history of Oman.

The country has been ruled for the past 41 years as an absolute monarchy by Sultan Qaboos bin Said, with all political parties banned, and the elected Shura Council limited to proffering advice, without legislative power. The Oman News Agency condemned the protest as "riots" by a "vandal group," claiming demonstrators had burned down a police station and the governor's residence.

The sultan issued a decree Saturday replacing six ministers and last week raised the minimum wage by 40 percent, in an effort to forestall further unrest.

Mass protests continued Sunday in Bahrain, another Gulf sheikdom that is headquarters for the US Navy's 5th Fleet. Thousands of demonstrators marched through the diplomatic residential area of Manama, the capital, chanting slogans against the monarchy and opposing any talks until he abdicates.

The march came a day after the king fired four cabinet members, two of them members of the royal family, but retained the king's uncle, Sheik Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, as prime minister—a post he has held for 41 years.

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