

Egyptian junta launches deadliest crackdown in months

By Johannes Stern
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Approaching the third anniversary of the Egyptian Revolution on January 25 and a referendum on Egypt's new constitution in for mid-January, Egypt's military junta is intensifying its crackdown on all opposition to its rule.

On Friday, security forces cracked down on demonstrations called by the Muslim Brotherhood (MB)-led Anti-Coup Alliance, killing at least 14 protesters and injuring 62. According to official Ministry of Health reports, five were killed in Cairo, two in the Suez Canal city of Ismailia, one in Alexandria; the remaining deaths occurred in Giza, Fayoum and Minya in Upper Egypt.

Security forces reportedly used live ammunition against protesters. The local Health Ministry official of the rural province of Fayoum, Medhat Shukri, told Reuters that three protesters, including a student, died from bullet wounds to the chest and head. Another university student was shot dead during clashes in the southern town of Minya.

The heaviest clashes took place in Cairo and neighboring Giza on the West bank of the Nile. In the Cairo district of Nasr City, heavily-armed riot police fired tear gas at protesters who defended themselves with fireworks and stones. In the neighborhoods of Maadi, Al Haram, and Alf Maskan, battles between security forces and protesters continued until late at night.

During the crackdown, hundreds of MB members have been arrested. Police said they detained more than 258, while the Interior Ministry issued a statement claiming that 122 were arrested for possession of weapons.

Friday's crackdown was the deadliest since October 6, when security forces killed more than 50 anti-regime protesters on the 40th anniversary of the beginning of

the 1973 October War. It comes after the junta issued an anti-protest law late November and drafted a new constitution effectively enshrining military rule. On December 25, the military-backed interim government declared the MB a "terrorist organization".

Since the July 3 military coup that toppled MB President Mohamed Mursi, the junta has been using the cover of an alleged "fight against terrorism" to crack down on its Islamist rivals and restore the military and police apparatus that existed before the toppling of long-time dictator Hosni Mubarak.

The junta is now moving to wipe out the MB and destroy all its bastions of influence in Egyptian society. A committee charged with confiscating the group's property has frozen the assets of over 700 leading MB members, including its Supreme Guide Mohamed Badie, his deputies Kheirat Al-Shater, Rashad Bayoumi, Mahmoud Ezzat and Gomaa Amin and several members of its guidance bureau.

The committee also placed 87 schools affiliated to MB under the authority of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Awqaf (religious endowments) took over several mosques previously controlled by the Islamist organization.

In past days, judges also set the trial dates for jailed MB leaders. On Wednesday, a trial against Mursi himself is expected to resume and a second one on January 28. He and other MB members face charges of inciting violence against anti-government protesters in December 2012, escaping from prison during the 2011 uprising, and carrying out a "terrorist conspiracy" against Egypt. The charges carry a possible death penalty.

The military junta that is now trying Mursi and other leading MB figures for incitement of violence against protesters has itself carried out massacres that killed at

least 1,500 opponents of the coup and wounded thousands more. Coup leader General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi as minister of defence and interior minister Mohamed Ibrahim both served under Mursi and were thus directly involved in the repression of protesters during Mursi's presidency.

The military regime is seeking to create an atmosphere of terror to forestall a renewed explosion in the working class, the main social force behind the revolution. The Egyptian Center for Social and Economic Rights (ECESR) recently published figures showing that workers held 2,486 protests in 2013. While 2243 took place under Mursi and the MB, 243 occurred under the military junta.

After the coup, protests declined but recent months have seen several significant working class protests, most prominently the Mahalla textile workers strikes in October, the Sukhari Gold miners' strike last month—which was dispersed by police on December 15—and the ongoing sit-in of 5000 steel workers from the Egyptian Iron and Steel Company in Helwan for higher wages and production bonuses. Last Wednesday, Egyptian doctors also declared a partial strike, demanding higher minimum wages and an increase of the national health budget from 3.5 percent to 15 percent of the total state budget.

According to the ECESR, November—the month when the anti-protest law was passed—witnessed the highest number of workers' protests since the coup.

Amid this growing working class opposition, the junta is also expanding its crackdown against political groups and activists who initially backed the July 3 coup, such as the April 6 Youth Movement and the pseudo-left Revolutionary Socialists (RS).

On Sunday, the Giza Criminal Court issued a suspended one-year jail sentence against activist Alaa Abdel-Fattah and his sister Mona Seif for allegedly assaulting the presidential campaign headquarters of former presidential candidate and last prime minister under Mubarak, General Ahmed Shafiq. Fattah has been arrested on November 28 for violating the new anti-protest law.

Last Thursday, the Raml Misdemeanor Court sentenced nine activists from Alexandria to two years in prison and a fine of 50 000 Egyptian pounds (US\$7,184). The activists, including RS member Mahienour E-Massry, were sentenced under Article 19

of the protest law, which sets out draconian penalties of up to 10 years in prison and fines of up to 500,000 Egyptian pounds (\$72,500) for violations against it.

The week before, a court had sentenced April 6 Youth Movement founders Ahmed Maher, Mohamed Adel and Ahmed Douma to three years in jail for violating the law and allegedly assaulting police officers.

April 6 and the RS are currently aligned with the Islamist Strong Egypt Party of former MB leader Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh in the so-called Revolutionary Path Front (RPF). The RPF is concerned that the junta's crackdown could provoke another working class explosion. Having initially backed the coup, they are now working to reconcile the factions of the Egyptian ruling, aiming to create a better mechanism to control the working class.

The counterrevolutionary character of the affluent middle class milieu in Egypt is most openly expressed by the newly founded coalition of the so-called "Forces for Democracy and Social Justice". The coalition consists of various Nasserite, Stalinist and pseudo-left groups with whom the activists and parties of the RPF have previously been aligned: the Tamarod movement, the Egyptian Communist Party, the Egyptian Socialist Party, the Kifaya Movement, the Socialist Alliance Party, and the Tagammu Party.

The misnamed coalition is cynically hailing the junta's crackdown as part of a struggle for "democracy, social justice and national independence". At its founding conference, last Thursday it called upon all political forces to vote for the junta's reactionary constitution and mobilize "millions of Egyptians" to "deal with the terrorism of the Muslim Brotherhood."

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