

Egyptian regime hangs six after ex-president Mursi sentenced to death

By Bill Van Auken
18 May 2015

The Egyptian regime of General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi carried out the hanging Sunday of six individuals convicted in a frame-up military trial on terrorism charges. The mass execution came just one day after ousted President Mohamed Mursi was sentenced to death along with 105 other defendants in another politically motivated and rigged proceeding.

Together, these actions are emblematic of the vicious police-state character of the regime in Cairo, which is a key pillar of US and Western European imperialist interests in the Middle East. The judicial proceedings that led to the death sentences for the six men hanged Sunday constituted a cruel farce.

The six were charged with killing nine members of the state security forces during armed operations claimed by the Sinai-based Islamic militant group Ansar Beit al-Maqdis during March 2014.

Known as the Arab Sharkas case, after the village north of Cairo where the defendants were allegedly captured in a police raid on a warehouse, the prosecution was based on lies and fabrications from beginning to end.

The security forces who raided the warehouse reported that they had killed six men there, leaving no one alive. Lawyers and family members of the accused told Amnesty International that three of the men had been arrested were secretly imprisoned at the time of their alleged crimes, while the other three had been arrested and held incommunicado in an army jail before the raid in Arab Sharkas.

Calling the trial “grossly unfair,” Amnesty noted that the case was based upon confessions that the defendants said were extracted under torture.

The same methods utilized against the men who were hanged Sunday were employed in the trial of Mursi and his 105 codefendants. The charges against them stemmed from a mass prison break in which they were freed from illegal administrative detention. Their jailing had been

ordered by the former dictator, Hosni Mubarak, as part of a state of emergency aimed at crushing the January 25th Revolution of 2011, which ultimately forced him from power.

The case fabricated against Mursi and his codefendants rested on the allegation that the break from Cairo’s Wadi al-Natroun prison had been a conspiracy developed between the Muslim Brotherhood, the Palestinian group Hamas, the Lebanese Shia movement Hezbollah and “varied criminals.” They were accused of damaging and setting fire to prison buildings, killing guards and looting weapons.

In reality, prisoners testified at the time that they were herded out of the jail by armed men dressed in civilian clothes who threatened to kill them if they did not leave. One witness reported that the men assured them that they had nothing to fear because “we’re not patrolling the streets anymore,” leading them to understand that they were members of the Mubarak regime’s security forces.

As for the supposed Hamas connection, Hamas spokesman Sami Abu-Zuhri revealed that some of the Hamas members named as codefendants in the case against Mursi had died before Egypt’s 2011 uprising even took place, while others were serving long prison terms in Israeli jails at the time of the alleged offenses.

Similarly, the civilian kangaroo court issued death sentences for 16 other defendants, including Muslim Brotherhood leaders Mohamed El Beltagy and Khairat El Shater, on charges of espionage and “conspiring with foreign powers”—namely Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran’s Revolutionary Guard—to destabilize Egypt.

Mursi was also charged in this second case, but no ruling against him or 18 other defendants was announced Saturday. It has been postponed until June 2, leading to speculation that he will probably not receive a second death sentence, but rather be condemned to life imprisonment.

Among those sentenced to die in this second conspiracy trial was one woman, 28-year-old Sondos Asem, a member of Mursi's Freedom and Justice Party (the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood) who served as the former international media coordinator for Mursi's administration, edited the movement's online English-language web site and was part of the group's foreign relations committee. She was tried in absentia.

Also sentenced to die in this second trial was Emad Shahin, a professor at Georgetown University and a visiting scholar at Columbia University in the US, who was likewise tried in absentia.

Following the court's decision, Shahin declared in a statement: "For over two years, the army and security agencies have staged a counterrevolution against all those associated with the January 25 Revolution, combating the aspirations of Egyptians for building a free and democratic society. Agencies that are supposed to serve the people are instead oppressing them."

Indeed, the handing down of death sentences against Mursi and his codefendants is only the latest in a series of repressive measures. The junta formed by Sisi unleashed a bloodbath in the wake of the July 2013 coup that ousted Mursi, massacring over 1,000 protesters in Cairo's Rabaa Square. Over 40,000 Egyptians have been imprisoned on political charges.

The principal target of this violent state repression is the Egyptian working class, which was the principal social actor in the mass upheavals that overthrew Mubarak. The criminalization of all forms of social opposition and protest and the branding of all opposition to the ruling regime as "terrorism" is meant to quell the movement of the Egyptian workers, which erupted into a massive strike wave before, during and after the events of January and February of 2011.

Late last month, an Egyptian court ruled that any strike by workers in the state sector was against the "public interest" and that anyone participating in a walkout or sit-in would be summarily fired from their jobs. The ruling also stated that strikes were a violation of Islamic sharia law. The decision provoked outrage among public employees and warnings that it would soon be extended to the private sector.

The United States is "deeply concerned" about the Egyptian court decision to seek the death penalty against Mursi, a State Department official said on Sunday, speaking to the media only on condition of anonymity. Such ritualistic statements of "concern" over the Sisi regime's crimes cannot mask the fact that this brutal

repression enjoys firm support from Washington.

The State Department official neither disputed the grotesquely fabricated charges against Mursi and his codefendants, nor challenged the appropriateness of their being sentenced to hang. Rather, this toothless protest concerned itself only with the form of the judicial railroading, suggesting that "mass trials and mass sentences" are illegitimate.

At the same time, the US official stressed that the sentences were only "preliminary," echoing the Sisi regime's own response to international outrage over the court rulings.

Under the civilian court system in Egypt, the sentences are subject to a nonbinding review by the country's chief Muslim cleric, the Grand Mufti, as well as a separate judicial appeal. The state-controlled media has charged that criticism of the mass death sentence was "unfair" because of its supposedly preliminary character. It stressed that in the last such mass ruling in April, in which 683 individuals were sentenced to hang; objections from the mufti led to the death sentences being confirmed for "only" 183 of them.

Behind its human rights pretenses, the real position of the Obama administration has been made clear through its restoration of full military aid to the Egyptian regime, amounting to some \$1.3 billion annually. It both relies on Sisi's police state to quell the revolutionary strivings of the Egyptian working class and to provide it with local forces to intervene on behalf of imperialism in neighboring countries, including both Libya and Yemen.

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