

Wave of anti-government protests across Egypt

By Jean Shaoul
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Workers have taken to the streets in towns and villages across Egypt in anti-government rallies, defying a ban on demonstrations.

They are protesting government corruption and the increase in the price of food and basic commodities, as well as the demolition of houses constructed without a government permit or on farmland.

The rallies have been ongoing since September 20, the anniversary of last year's protest movement that led to 3,000 arrests by security forces. The central demand is that Egypt's brutal dictator, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who ousted elected President Mohammed Mursi in a 2013 military coup, step down.

The protests were called by Mohamed Ali, a construction contractor living in Spain, who has posted video testimonies about the corruption of senior figures, including el-Sisi, incurring the wrath of the Egyptian authorities who are now seeking his extradition on charges of tax evasion and money laundering.

Egyptian police beat demonstrator (Twitter).

The police made extensive preparations ahead of September 20 to forestall the demonstrations. Patrol cars roamed the streets of downtown Cairo, especially Tahrir Square, the scene of the 2011 mass demonstrations that brought down the long-time US-backed dictator, Hosni Mubarak.

Police were deployed in and around key buildings, and security forces stopped and searched pedestrians, demanding ID. According to *Al-Arabi al-Jadeed*, more than 1,000 young men and women were arrested in front of subway stations and in the streets surrounding Tahrir Square in the run-up to the demonstrations.

El-Sisi has presided over an International Monetary Fund (IMF) dictated "reform" programme that has included slashing subsidies, raising fuel prices, cutting the health and education budgets and firing government employees. While these measures cut the budget deficit from 12.5 percent in 2016 to 6.7 percent in 2019, they ruined much of Egypt's middle class and led to soaring poverty rates.

Last month, the government started demolishing homes built without a license, potentially impacting vast numbers of people, particularly in the Cairo conurbation, home to 20 million people and desperately short of affordable housing. People would be spared demolition and eviction if they paid a hefty fine, prompting suspicions that this was a money-raising operation. Such was the anger that three weeks ago the government was forced to reduce the fines for landlords and contractors violating the licensing regulations.

The shortage of homes has become all the more inflammatory in the wake of el-Sisi's extravagant construction projects, such as the expansion of the Suez Canal and the new \$58 billion administrative capital that will benefit the military construction companies and the financial elite, and which have become white elephants in the midst of the pandemic. The new seat of government being built in the desert 40 miles outside Cairo has already cost over \$35 billion and will provide luxury homes for 5 million affluent people and just 100,000 "affordable" homes.

The September 20 demonstrations were small and concentrated in towns and villages outside the capital, largely in the Nile Delta region. But within days, they spread to other parts of the country, including Giza, Alexandria, Al-Minya, Damietta, Suez, Qalyoubia, Beni Sueif and Cairo, governorates encompassing Egypt's main industrial areas.

The mainstream media both in Egypt and internationally have largely ignored the protests and the government's repressive response. But videos on social media and opposition TV channels showed the security forces using tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse protesters.

Egyptian security forces killed at least one protester Friday. The Geneva-based Committee for Justice reported that riot police in the village of Balayda in Giza governorate, part of the vast Cairo conurbation, had shot and killed a 25-year-old protester, with other reports that police had killed another three people, including a child.

Police have detained hundreds since the anti-government rallies began more than a week ago. According to human

rights lawyers handling their cases, those arrested face charges of “joining a terrorist group,” “broadcasting false news,” “misusing social media” and illegal protesting.

The protests take place amid the pandemic, which has exacerbated the already horrendous economic and social conditions facing most of Egypt’s 102 million people. Egypt has officially recorded almost 103,000 cases of the coronavirus and nearly 5,900 deaths.

The official unemployment rate is 9.6 percent, up 2 percentage points on last year, and is expected to rise to 20 percent this year. It particularly affects educated young people between 24 and 34. The loss of revenues from tourism, fees from shipping transiting the Suez Canal and remittances—worth \$25 billion a year—from the five million Egyptians working in the Gulf has decimated the economy, leading to mass layoffs, pay cuts and widespread destitution.

The Gulf states have laid off workers, many of whom have returned home, adding to Egypt’s unemployment, while Kuwait has announced that foreign workers will not be allowed to return while the pandemic continues. This makes the status of 700,000 Egyptians working in Kuwait extremely tenuous.

While the huge Zohr natural gas field in the Mediterranean seemed to offer a lifeline of billions of dollars for Egypt’s beleaguered economy, that too has been hit by the pandemic-induced recession.

Egypt was forced to apply for more loans, in addition to a \$12 billion loan, from the IMF that will add a further \$8 billion to its massive external debt of \$120 billion, equal to 90 percent of the country’s GDP. This means an annual debt servicing charge of about \$13 billion and finding a way of rescheduling a quarter of the debt. The Arab Reform Initiative estimates that Egypt will need to raise interest rates in a bid to halt inflation and the flight of capital, revalue or float the Egyptian pound and increase borrowing.

Protests have been relatively small, in part because Ali has no political party or programme, but crucially because of the disillusionment that followed the revolutionary movement that brought down the Mubarak dictatorship in 2011 only to be replaced by an even more brutal regime. Nevertheless, the fact they have taken place at all under conditions of el-Sisi’s clampdown testifies to the social and economic powder keg over which he presides. Commentators are already talking about the possibility of the military intervening to organise el-Sisi’s retirement in favour of another military figure to save the regime.

It is of the utmost importance that this new protest movement of Egypt’s powerful working class understands the source of its defeat in 2011-13. The key issue posed by that revolutionary upheaval was to secure the political independence of the working class from all of the various

bourgeois forces competing to succeed Mubarak, which included military officers, bourgeois “liberal” parties and the Muslim Brotherhood.

The misnamed Revolutionary Socialists (RS), part of the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left milieu in Egypt that reflected the interests of affluent sections of the upper-middle class, initially claimed that the military junta that replaced Mubarak would grant reforms. It then tried to channel the continuing opposition of the working class behind the Muslim Brotherhood, claiming that its electoral victory in 2012 represented a “victory for the revolution.” As working class opposition to Mursi’s Muslim Brotherhood-led government grew in 2013, the RS embraced the newly formed Tamarrud (meaning “Rebellion”) campaign, funded and promoted by the military-intelligence apparatus, as “a road to complete the revolution.” This paved the way for the military to overthrow Mursi in July 2013. The RS are on record as welcoming el-Sisi’s coup that inaugurated a reign of terror as a “second revolution.”

As new revolutionary struggles emerge across the Middle East with strikes and protests taking place in recent months in Iraq, Lebanon, Iran and Sudan, as well as in the US and Europe, the fundamental issue remains that of building a revolutionary party to mobilise the working class against capitalism and imperialist war and for socialism. Such parties must be built as sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Egypt and across the Middle East.

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