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Protests shake Egypt regime to its core

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EGYPT IS at a decisive turning point. For over a week, mass protests have taken place on the streets of Cairo, Alexandria and elsewhere, demanding an end to Hosni Mubarak's 30-year presidency. The demonstrators are fighting for democratic rights, jobs, affordable food, and an end to corruption and state oppression. They shook the Mubarak regime to its core and caused huge alarm in Washington and Downing Street, which regard Egypt as a key regional ally.

The middle classes, students, workers, the urban poor and even judges all joined the tidal wave of opposition to dictatorship. For days, standing up to vicious brutality from the riot police and thuggish plain-clothes police, hundreds of thousands of Egyptians sent a clear message – "Go! Go! Go!" Older people passed down water from their flats to demonstrators in the streets below. In response, the hated riot police deployed tear gas, rubber bullets and live ammunition. At least 150 were killed and thousands injured.

In cities like Alexandria and Suez, the opposition movement reached insurrectionary proportions, with police and security forces retreating from parts of the cities.

There are elements of popular power and control in some areas of the country. The protesters instinctively fraternise with the rank and file soldiers. Yet, at the time of writing, Mubarak still clings to power. It is not excluded that a desperate Mubarak may still try to order a bloody crackdown, a last desperate throw of the dice, perhaps using his despised riot police and security police. But the consequences of doing so would be incalculable for Egypt and the region, provoking mass outrage and deep splits and even conflicts within the Egyptian state apparatus.

The statement by the army tops indicates they are trying to present themselves as 'arbiters' between Mubarak and the masses, to oversee an 'orderly transition', maintain the state machine, and ensure the continuation of the overall interests of the ruling class probably without Mubarak.

The rank and file of the army, who are largely conscripts with close ties to workers and the poor, can be decisively won over to the mass movement on a clear class and socialist programme. This would include the call for full trade union and other democratic rights,

a living wage, the setting up of democratically run committees of rank and file soldiers and for the election of officers.

The masses are pushing to remove Mubarak and his cronies from power while the ruling elite is attempting to re-establish itself, probably around a new cobbled together 'government'.

Cat and mouse

THE REGIME tried to play 'cat and mouse' with the demonstrators, taking riot police and soldiers on and off the streets and ordering military jets to make intimidating displays above central Cairo. It may hope that such tactics will see the demonstrators become exhausted, lose momentum and start to fall away. Although this is a real danger in the absence of a powerful working class political alternative, to date the protests are getting much larger. The call for "millions strong" demonstrations and a general strike this week could have the potential to force not just Mubarak from office but other cronies of his as well.

The regime attempted to give out a message that if it falls, it will be followed by greater instability and chaos, to try to scare people back to tolerating its continued existence. In some areas, there has been an outbreak of looting and violent robbery. Dispossessed social layers could be involved but also, according to independent reports, so too are police in plain-clothes and convicts deliberately released from prison.

People have organised protection of their own homes and neighbourhoods, mainly in more wealthy areas, forming local groups to patrol streets and control traffic, armed with wooden clubs and knives.

In this situation, democratically elected committees of mass struggle and defence, against state repression and looting, need to be established, in all the neighbourhoods, workplaces, schools and colleges, and linked on local, regional and national scale.

The Mubarak regime has been the biggest recipient of US aid in the region, apart from Israel. This has gone to financing the monstrous security machine used against workers and youth for so long. Mubarak has been a slavish follower of US policy in the Middle East, including acting as prison guard over Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and as an ally against Iran. Washington fears a post-Mubarak Egypt could see US policy in the region unravel, with

the coming to power of the Muslim Brotherhood or another regime not prepared to be as obsequious as the last one.

While the Western powers recognise that change is now unavoidable in Egypt, they are loath to see Mubarak removed by mass revolt, given the message it sends to the oppressed masses throughout the region. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who described the Egyptian regime as "stable" just a few days ago, now calls for "an orderly transition" of power – meaning one which safeguards the interests of the Egyptian ruling class, as well as that of imperialism in the region.

Under the 'guidance' of Washington, a 'provisional government' could be thrown together, even including various leaders of small pro-capitalist opposition parties, none of which have mass support. Attempts could be made to keep Mubarak formally in power for some time, while real influence would reside with Suleiman or another leading figure from the regime. If Mubarak is forced out, Mohammed el-Baradei, a Nobel peace laureate and former head of the UN's nuclear watchdog, or some other figure can be used to head a "transitional" but still pro-Western and pro-capitalist government.

Muslim Brotherhood

THE LARGEST opposition political force, the Muslim Brotherhood, held back from supporting the protests initially. "At first the movement showed little interest in the protests and announced they weren't going to participate; later they were overtaken by events and forced to get involved or risk losing all credibility", wrote Khalil al-Anani, an expert on Egypt's political Islamists (Guardian, 01/02/11). Muslim Brotherhood leaders mandated el-Baradei to negotiate with the Mubarak regime and then to talk to the army about forming a "national salvation government".

The fact that, so far, the mass movement is largely a "secular protest against dictatorship" (Guardian, 31/01/11) shows the potential for a non-sectarian, working class, socialist alternative, leading the oppressed. But this alternative on a mass basis needs to be built. In its absence, other forces, including the Muslim Brotherhood – which for all its rhetoric has a pro-capitalist agenda – and despite its limited popular support in recent mass protests, can start to make bigger gains, stepping into the political vacuum.

The mass movement has displayed features of popular revolt. In its first stages, following decades of dictatorship, the protests are understandably mainly centred on democratic demands and slogans. As yet, the working class has not decisively and clearly put its stamp on unfolding events. To do this fully requires a mass party of the working class, with an independent class and socialist programme.

Al Jazeera reported on 29 January that 1,700 public workers in Suez had gone on an indefinite strike demanding Mubarak's ousting. Independent union leaders announced on 30 January the organisation of the new 'Federation of Egyptian Trade Unions', calling for the "formation of committees in all factories and enterprises to protect, defend them and to set a date for a general strike". At this stage, however, the scale of the forces represented in these developments is not clear.

A general strike could unite all sections of the working and middle classes with the youth and the street protests. Such decisive action – paralysing the whole of the country, which could spell the end of Mubarak and his regime – requires planning and organisation, through democratically-run committees in the workplaces, colleges and elsewhere.

Removing Mubarak from power would be a huge step forward for Egyptian working people. But on its own it will not be enough to meet their class needs and aspirations for a better standard of living. A socialist programme of nationalisation of all the big corporations and banks under democratic workers' control would lay the basis for planning the use of Egypt's resources to meet the needs of all those who are denied a decent life under Mubarak's corrupt and cruel regime.

The potential of a mass movement across the region that can win democratic rights and make sweeping social change is indicated by the fire that was lit by the Tunisian movement. Despots across North Africa and the Middle East are terrified of domestic mass protests and already demonstrations are taking place in Yemen, Sudan, Jordan, Syria, Libya and elsewhere.

One regime after another is forced to rush to make concessions to the stirring masses, particularly over high food prices. The repercussions of the "Tunis-ami" of popular mass struggle for real democratic rights and a transformation of living standards will continue for a long time.

Scottish Anti-Cuts Alliance established



20,000 people marched against cuts in Edinburgh during October 2010.
photo Ray Smith

AN HISTORIC step was taken on Saturday 29 January when the Scottish Anti-Cuts Alliance (SACA) was established at a conference in Glasgow. This followed a successful Defend Glasgow Services rally that drew more than 400 people.

Matt Dobson

The conference attendance was made up of 58 delegates elected from trade union organisations, local anti-cuts campaigns and national campaigns such as Youth Fight for Jobs, and another 35 visitors.

The fighting tone of the conference was set by Janice Godrich, president of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS).

Janice explained that unions with a fighting leadership such as the PCS would continue to push for coordinated industrial action against cuts. She stressed that a powerful anti-cuts movement could pressure union leaders to organise action.

Brian Smith, branch secretary of Glasgow City Unison, moved the pro-

posed founding statement of SACA.

Brian argued that the key founding principles of the alliance should be opposition to all cuts.

SACA would support industrial action by workers and mass resistance by communities, and support the setting of no cuts 'needs budgets' by councils and the Scottish parliament. Elected politicians who want to participate in anti-cuts campaigning should vote against cuts.

Brian explained that SACA would not be a substitute for the trade unions or local anti-cuts campaigns but would act as a national coordinating body to build a mass anti-cuts movement against the cuts.

Harvey Duke from the Dundee Unemployed Support Centre gave a rousing account of the challenge made to Tory minister Iain Duncan Smith to come to Dundee and publicly debate the planned attacks on welfare and benefits.

A National Union of Journalists representative reported on huge cuts to the BBC and workers organising to fight back.

Dave Sherry, from Unite Scottish

Housing Association branch and a Right to Work campaign and Socialist Workers Party member, moved five amendments to the founding statement.

Amendment Four sought to delete the proposal that all elected politicians who wish to participate in SACA must vote against the cuts. The amendment wanted to only "encourage" councillors, MSPs and MPs to vote against cuts.

After an equal number of speakers for and against Amendment Four, it was rejected by 33 votes to 18.

The conference agreed to set up a steering committee for the alliance with two delegates from each local anti-cuts campaign, trade union organisation and national campaign.

It was agreed to link up on an all-Britain level with anti-cuts campaigns such as the one recently set up by the National Shop Stewards Network.

For a more detailed report of the SACA conference, see www.socialistparty.org.uk