

Egypt's 'second revolution' welcomes gains, abhors threats and presses for more

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Undaunted by threats, protesters in Cairo's Tahrir and other cities insist they will maintain their protests and up the pressure till promises are fulfilled and neglected demands are met.

At 4pm Tuesday afternoon, the bustling, usually noisy streets of midtown Cairo were uncommonly traffic-free and quiet.

As sunset approached, thousands of Cairenes had already rushed home or were well on their way.

Earlier in the day, businesses, banks and even the Egyptian cabinet sent employees home long before the end of the work day in anticipation of violent clashes between protesters, security forces or "thugs," at a million man march, which different revolutionary youths organisations and political parties had called in Tahrir square for that afternoon.

However, by 9pm Cairo's midtown was back to normal with its endless traffic jams, gratuitous honking and hordes of wandering shoppers and pedestrians.

The planned protest in Tahrir had taken place smoothly and in a peaceful manner, with no serious, violent confrontations or incidents.

Tens of thousands of protesters descended on Tahrir to join and support hundreds of campers who have staged a sit-in in the square since last Friday.

For four hours angry crowds voiced dissatisfaction and resentment towards both the government of Prime Minister Esaam Sharaf and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which has ruled the country since the ousting of former president Mubarak last February.

The protesters charged that both the government and SCAF have been extremely slow in meeting the basic demands of the revolution that brought them to power. The most glaring failure remained the fact that more than five months after the overthrow of Mubarak, the deposed dictator had yet to be brought to trial, while the men responsible for the murder of nearly a thousand peaceful protesters, as well as the serious injury of thousands of others have yet to be held to account. Indeed, many of these men still held their posts in the police hierarchy.

Millions of Egyptians were also outraged that not only had the country's brutal police force not been overhauled (a fundamental demand of the revolution which was launched on Police Day), but was increasingly returning to its old habits of violence and torture.

In Tahrir, speaker after speaker orating from makeshift podiums accused Prime Minister Sharaf and Field Marshal Mohamed Tantawi, the head of SCAF, for not doing enough to meet the revolution's social and political demands.

The government's inability to prosecute officers accused of killing and injuring thousands of protesters in the January 25th uprising against the former dictator topped the list of grievances protesters brought to the square tonight.

At one end of the square, one young woman in her early 20s led a group of 200 protesters in chanting against the slow pace of trials for Mubarak, his family and other symbols of corruption over the last few months. "You keep investigating and investigating, but we already know Mubarak is guilty," the young woman shouted, rallying her angry followers.

At the other end of Tahrir, a middle-aged professional told crowds that he and many others have lost faith in SCAF and its repeated pledges to uphold the goals and slogans of the revolution.

A family of six, the two parents and their four teenage children, repeatedly circled the square with homemade placards that captured the mood of the latest wave of protests in Tahrir, as well as elsewhere around the country. "We have had it with painkillers. We won't accept any more Aspirins," one placard read, in clear reference to the prime minister's several month-old promises of reform.

At 6pm, 2,000 protesters led an exceptionally disciplined and well organized march to deliver the messages of the square to the headquarters of the cabinet on Maglis Al-Shaab Street, less than a kilometre away from Tahrir.

Scores of young people stood guard before cars parked on both sides of Qasr Al-Aini, the historic Cairo Street that connects Tahrir square to the cabinet offices, in order to prevent any acts of vandalism. Meanwhile, marchers led the procession with the chant of "Peaceful, Peaceful," but, nonetheless, continued to express their chagrin against Sharaf and SCAF, vowing never to forget the sacrifices of the martyrs.

No altercations took place between protesters and the hundreds of riot police and military police guarding the cabinet headquarters. After having symbolically delivered their message, the protesters marched back to Tahrir without incident.

Simultaneously, tens of thousands staged protests and marches in other cities, including Alexandria, Mansoura and Suez.

Today's demonstrations come on the heel of weeks of rising tensions between supporters of the revolution on the one hand, and Sharaf's cabinet and SCAF on the other.

Last Friday, an estimated 2 million Egyptians protested in Cairo, Alexandria and other cities to express outrage at what they perceive to be the government's soft-glove handling of corrupt and brutal ex-regime figures and police officers.

The revolution's supporters were also angered by the administration's neglect of the question of "social justice," which was among the top three slogans of the revolution. They objected to the approval a budget perceived as glaringly in favour of the rich, crafted at the expense of middle and lower income groups - this in a country where 40 per cent of the population live on \$2 a day.

The relationship between the people and the post-revolution administration, was made especially tense by recent events like the brutal police clampdowns, which saw the use of tear gas and rubber bullets on unarmed protesters calling for martyrs' families rights in Tahrir Square on 28 June, as well as in last month's mass protests in Suez City by striking workers at the seven companies servicing the Suez Canal.

In the past 72 hours, Prime Minister Sharaf attempted to placate the angry public via two addresses aired on Egyptian state television. Sharaf promised to dismiss officers accused of killing protesters during the uprising, to appoint new governors and to properly honour and provide support for the families of martyrs as well as the injured.

He also vowed to overhaul his cabinet in order to bring in new ministers more responsive to the people's urgent political, social and economic demands.

Back in Tahrir, most protesters, while sympathetic to the prime minister, did not seem to trust that he was capable of delivering meaningful reforms. Some called out for his resignation.

Yet, many also felt that Sharaf's concessions, though timid and vague, represented clear vindication for those who had decided to embark on open-ended sit-ins to pressure the government.

"A lot has been achieved, real concessions have been made," Emad Mubarak, a seasoned human rights and democracy activist, told Ahram Online in the square. While insisting that the sit-ins and other peaceful forms of escalating demonstrations must be maintained, "to keep up the pressure," Mubarak said he felt that gains should also be acknowledged and celebrated.

He echoed complaints expressed by several other activists who spoke to Ahram Online, namely that the protest's agenda was being driven more by emotion than reasoned political thinking. In particular, Mubarak and many other activists expressed their total rejection of forms of escalation, displayed the blockade of the Mogamma administrative building in Tahrir, that run counter to the interests of the public.

Such measures threaten to turn the people against the protesters, they argued.

By late evening, the protesters in Tahrir Square had decided to lift the blockade of Mogamma once and for all.

Shortly after 7pm, the crowds in Tahrir erupted in loud cheers as MCs announced through the huge sound systems dispersed around the square, that the much reviled, Deputy Prime Minister Yehia El-Gamal, had just resigned from his post.

As night fell over Tahrir, thousands continued to circle the lively square, listening to speeches, discussions, songs and music.

Many, however, remained unsure of what to make of the mixed signals SCAF had sent out to the public in the statement delivered on state television earlier that afternoon and later on in a press conference.

The statement had combined a reiteration of SCAF's official position of respecting freedom of expression and assembly with the issue of a stern warning to protesters not to disrupt public business.

The majority were still infuriated that SCAF had yet to respond clearly to the demand that no civilian should be referred to military trial, no matter the pretext.

Members of many political coalitions such as Revolution Youth Coalition, the April 6th Movement, liberals and socialists who organized the protest felt more or less content with both the turnout and the outcome.

Meanwhile, only scattered numbers of individual youth members of the Muslim Brotherhood took

part in today's mobilization in Tahrir and elsewhere.

The leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest political force in the country, refused to endorse or help mobilize for today's march, as Brotherhood leaders continue to maintain a policy of uncritical support for SCAF.

By 9pm Cairenes learned that Tahrir protesters had succeeded in keeping their demonstration peaceful, despite a barrage of rumours of imminent violence.

Thousands of pedestrians and cars were back to jamming the streets of downtown Cairo. As is common on a mildly breezy summer evening, people returned to the streets to shop, loiter and honk their car horns.

Not a few of these ventured into Tahrir, past the check points set up by popular committee members, who have been guarding both the square and the national museum since the early morning hours.

These passersby are curious to learn what the revolutionaries managed to accomplish today and, more importantly, what will come next. Perhaps predictably, Tahrir sit-in veterans dub these evening incomers "tourists."

Mostafa Ali [Omar], Wednesday 13 Jul 2011

P.S.

* From Ahram Online:

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/16273/Egypt/Politics-/Egypts-second-revolution-welcomes-gains,-abhors-th.aspx>