

# Violent Repression of Protests: How Much Has Changed in Egypt?

Jun 30, 2011



Brief Analysis

On July 1 and 8, protestors plan to hold demonstrations in Cairo's Tahrir Square. If they experience the same violent repression seen at the June 28-29 protests, however, many will begin to question how much has actually changed since the days of former president Hosni Mubarak.

## New Violence in Tahrir

On Tuesday, families of the martyrs of the Lotus Revolution were reportedly attacked by elements of "state security" at an event honoring them, and news of the incident was rapidly and widely disseminated through social media. By late Tuesday night, thousands of protestors had poured into Tahrir Square to join in solidarity with the martyrs' families. They too were attacked with tear gas, rubber bullets, and, reportedly, electric prods -- a scene eerily reminiscent of the most violent days of the revolution. Similar events unfolded on Wednesday as well.

Although the facts remain murky, the Ministry of Interior allegedly carried out the sustained attacks in collusion with hired "thugs." The sheer magnitude of the attacks, their brutality, and the highly mysterious and sudden resurgence of elements from within the despised state security apparatus raise questions about the extent to which Egyptians have truly dismantled the former regime.

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) quickly disavowed the attacks on its Facebook page and via the official media as having been carried out by "unidentified saboteurs seeking to undermine the relationship of the Egyptian security apparatus with the Egyptian people." It also urged citizens not to join the protests.

The Islamist Freedom and Justice Party, until now publicly allied with the SCAF's transition plan, linked the attacks to a State Administrative Court decision the previous day to dissolve Egypt's municipal councils, which were dominated by former ruling National Democratic Party officials. Most revolutionary forces had hailed the decision as at least partially responsive to their demands for the dismantling of former regime elements. And Prime Minister Essam Sharaf stated that his ministers would respect the decision despite reported controversy at the emergency cabinet meeting held after the ruling was handed down. The timing of the decision and attacks led some to conclude that the violence was instigated by disgruntled members of the dissolved councils, but numerous revolutionary forces insinuated a more sinister role for the SCAF itself.

## Transition under Strain

In recent weeks, politically engaged Egyptians on opposite ends of the political spectrum have been debating the desirability of the so-called "Tunisia model" of drafting a constitution prior to holding elections. Those who support this model oppose the SCAF's transition plan, which calls for parliamentary elections in September, to be followed by the drafting of a new constitution led by the new legislature. In their view, quick elections would unfairly benefit the most well organized political force, the Muslim Brotherhood, enabling it to monopolize the constitutional process. As a joint statement released by eight major human rights organizations asserted, "It may appear that the current declared course is more in keeping with the desire of the armed forces -- and the majority of Egyptians as

well -- to have the army return to the barracks as soon as possible and to turn over the country to an elected civilian authority, thus fostering the return of political stability and renewed production and development. Nevertheless, we believe that the current course and its timetable threaten to lead the country into a longer period of instability, will delay the army's return to the barracks, and will have negative consequences for the Egyptian economy."

As Egyptians continue to debate these principles, the SCAF is showing signs of stress from the vast task of governing the transition. Opaque and hierarchical decisionmaking has resulted in draconian laws such as one passed in March: a ban on workers' strikes, which led to Thursday's military tribunal convictions of five workers from the Petrojet Oil Company accused of "illegal activity that hampered the work of the government." Such decisions are sitting bitterly with Egypt's poor workers and have drawn protests from rights organizations, one of which issued a statement noting that "not even Mubarak would have dared pass such a law."

Indeed, acting head of state Field Marshal Muhammad Hussein Tantawi is facing a variety of human rights complaints, contributing to a growing credibility crisis. The prosecution of Mubarak regime members (e.g., former interior minister Habib al-Adly) and state security officers accused of murdering protesters has been sluggish, even as demonstrators and strikers are vigorously prosecuted. And consistent public airing of complaints regarding human rights violations finally compelled the SCAF to acknowledge, after continued denials, that it had in fact conducted "virginity tests" on female protesters detained on March 9. That was followed by a damning Amnesty International report decrying the military prosecutions of nearly 9,000 Egyptians since Mubarak's ouster, none of whom were reportedly given minimal guarantees of due process.

Even more alarming to the vast majority of Egyptians is the continued absence of public security, which has led to an estimated 200 percent spike in the crime rate and continued sectarian violence. The SCAF's perceived mishandling of efforts to dismantle the old regime and move toward a genuinely democratic order led hundreds of thousands to Tahrir Square on May 27. This in turn lent greater momentum to the "constitution first" movement, which many believe offers a more sound approach to a truly representative democracy in Egypt.

## Next Steps

**S**ome critics believe that the debate over the transition plan is esoteric and therefore not germane to the majority of Egyptians. Yet the events of June 28-29 showed the growing resolve of ordinary Egyptians in the face of a continued police state. The father of sixteen-year-old Muhammad Ramadan Ahmed -- killed by security forces on January 29 -- argued that "justice" is worth fighting and even dying for, and relinquishing the rights of Egypt's martyrs means that the country cannot truly progress.

Indeed, all of the factors discussed above -- particularly the continued heavy-handed security response to the protests of recent days, seemingly executed with the SCAF's approval -- risk widening the council's public credibility gap. During Wednesday's demonstrations, one repeated chant was, "Tantawi, we will not fear or bow our heads; we have been accustomed to [rubber] bullets." As mentioned previously, protests have already been called for on July 1 (which is being dubbed "The Day of the Martyr") and July 8 (in support of the "constitution first" model).

Overall, Egyptian protestors are fighting to ensure that the Lotus Revolution represents the removal of not just a dictator, but an entire dictatorship. The international community would do well to recognize that only a long-term investment in genuine civilian supremacy bolstered by democratic institutions will lead to greater stability for the most populous Arab country and, by extension, its neighbors.

*Dina Guirguis is the Keston Family research fellow in The Washington Institute's Project Fikra.* ❖

---

## RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022

◆  
Sana Quadri,  
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology

Feb 11, 2022

◆  
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022

◆  
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)

## TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Egypt \(/policy-analysis/egypt\)](/policy-analysis/egypt)

[North Africa \(/policy-analysis/north-africa\)](/policy-analysis/north-africa)