

New Egyptian prime minister appointed as protests grow

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Egypt's military rulers appointed a new prime minister Friday as protesters staged massive demonstrations for a seventh day to demand the immediate transfer of power to civilian rule.

Kamal el-Ganzouri, 78, a former prime minister under president Hosni Mubarak, was asked to form a new cabinet to replace the caretaker government that resigned this week. The former government, which also had been formed under the auspices of the military rulers and was headed by Essam Sharaf as prime minister, stepped down to protest violence by Egyptian security forces to suppress the growing demonstrations.

The brutal crackdown on protests across the country has left at least 41 people dead and more than 3,000 injured. The violence has mired the nation in a deepening political crisis just three days before landmark parliamentary elections are scheduled to begin.

In Washington, the White House called Friday for the new government to be "empowered with real authority immediately" and for elections to go ahead "expeditiously," leading to a full transfer of power to a civilian government.

The military chiefs have been scrambling to find someone to agree to take over as prime minister before the elections on Monday. The cabinet that resigned this week was seen as weak and subservient to the military council that took power following the winter uprising that ousted Mubarak on Feb. 11.

The military apparently resorted to Ganzouri after holding intensive discussions with more prominent figures such as Amr Moussa, the former Arab League chief, and Mohamed ElBaradei, a Nobel Peace Prize winner. Both turned down the job after demanding broad authorities, according to political figures who were briefed on the meetings.

Ganzouri would have "full powers to help him fulfill his duties with complete efficiency," the state news agency MENA reported. It was unclear whether that meant that the military rulers would hand some of their authorities to him.

In a televised news conference later Friday, Ganzouri appeared aged and anxious. He assured the nation that he accepted the job only after Egypt's military chief, Field Marshal Mohammed Hussein Tantawi, assured him that the ruling military council did not want to stay in power. He said that he could not form a new cabinet until after Monday's elections.

But Ganzouri's appointment was promptly rejected by protesters and a growing number of political parties and youth movements. Some demonstrators planned to stage a sit-in at the cabinet building in Cairo to block Ganzouri from meeting with new ministers.

Ganzouri, an economist, served as prime minister under Mubarak from January 1996 to October 1999. Before that, he was Mubarak's minister of planning and international cooperation. He earned a doctorate from the University of Michigan, taught in Egyptian universities and was a provincial governor in the 1970s.

Egyptian state television announced Ganzouri's appointment after tens of thousands of people flooded into Tahrir Square on Friday in what protesters called the "last chance" for Tantawi, Egypt's top military official and a former defense minister under Mubarak, to step aside.

ElBaradei prayed with the throngs of protesters in solidarity just before noon.

"On my way to Tahrir to pay my respects to the martyrs. Their sacrifice will not be in vain. Together we shall prevail," he wrote on his Twitter account.

The throngs in the square were the largest since the start of protests against the ruling military council, even though the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's largest opposition political organization, decided not to participate.

Field hospitals in the square were largely empty, and the only bangs were from firecrackers. The violence appeared to be over, at least for the time being. But demonstrators and opposition politicians said the military council's choice for prime minister was a sign that it still did not understand their demands.

"Ganzouri's appointment indicates that these people don't understand that there is a revolution, a revolution for the future, a revolution of the youth," said Bassel Adel, head of the Free Egyptians Party. "With all due respect to Dr. Kamal el-Ganzouri he . . . doesn't know these youth and what their demands are."

"This is not an old people's revolution," said Islam Gamal el -Shahed, 23, a medical student working in a makeshift clinic in Tahrir Square. "Ganzouri played his part in the old government. We need a strong government to stand up to the military council."

Down the road, a family stood together, silently holding signs. "The military council is Mubarak. They kill my son and burn your home," one said. "It's your turn now."

Supporters of the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces also turned out Friday, albeit in much smaller numbers than the opposition. Near the Defense Ministry, supporters chanted, "Legitimacy is not in Tahrir. Oh, freedom where are you? Tahrir stands between us and you."

In Alexandria, where protests against the council also were violently suppressed, pro-military demonstrators gathered to shout slogans as well. "Oh, Tahrir, collect yourselves," they chanted. "Do you want a pool of blood? Yes to stability."

In a statement on the latest developments, White House press secretary Jay Carney said protesters are demanding the realization of principles that the United States supports, including "political and economic reform" that meets region-wide aspirations. The statement urged an independent investigation into the deaths of protesters but added that the situation "requires a more fundamental solution, devised by Egyptians" and consistent with democratic principles.

"The United States strongly believes that the new Egyptian government must be empowered with real authority immediately," Carney said. "We believe that Egypt's transition to democracy must continue, with elections proceeding expeditiously, and all necessary measures taken to ensure security and prevent intimidation. Most importantly, we believe that the full transfer of power to a civilian government must take place in a just and inclusive manner that responds to the legitimate aspirations of the Egyptian people, as soon as possible."

The appointment of Ganzouri came a day after the military rulers rejected calls to delay the parliamentary elections and issued a strongly worded statement that could further polarize the country as it reels from a week of violent protests.

The statement called on "honorable people" to apprehend those causing strife and turn them over to the authorities. The vague directive could encourage vigilantism between camps supportive and critical of the military.

"Egypt is going through a decisive moment in the history of its revolution that demands alertness and solidarity from each and every one of us in order to stop the state from turning and from entering into a state of complete chaos," the statement said.

The Thursday communique was part of a series of moves made by the country's military leaders this week in a thus-far futile attempt to restore order and salvage their damaged reputation.

"This is the military spreading chaos, and it's very, very irresponsible," said Heba Morayef, an Egypt researcher for Human Rights Watch. "It fits in with their narrative, which is the military

is the neutral guardian of security which enjoys the trust of the people. That's why they would much rather have private citizens involved in identifying 'thugs' and 'agents.' "

In an earlier statement, the generals took the unusual step of apologizing for the deaths and promised to provide medical care to those wounded battling riot police near Cairo's Tahrir Square. The statement prompted activists to ask why the leaders hadn't stopped the attacks by police and military forces days ago.

The bloodshed and the manner in which the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces has responded have led to unprecedented criticism of an institution that has for decades been considered sacrosanct.

"After nine months, everyone has finally realized that the SCAF is driving the country to the edge and that the blood being spilled in Tahrir Square right now is nothing but the final episode of a series of mistakes and crimes committed by the military council," the Egyptian Social Democratic Party said in a statement Thursday. The liberal party was among those who called for a two-week postponement of the vote scheduled to take place Monday. They are demanding an immediate transfer of most of the military council's power to a national unity government led by a consensus figure.

After nearly a week of intense fighting, the clashes in Cairo appeared to subside Thursday as the military erected a barrier on the street that connects Tahrir Square and the Interior Ministry. Throughout the week, riot police fired large amounts of tear gas, rubber-coated bullets and apparently live ammunition from the building. Fights between protesters and security forces also broke out in Alexandria, Egypt's second-largest city, and other parts of the country.

The military chiefs' standing has taken a hit. A poll conducted in October and released this week by the Brookings Institution said 43 percent of Egyptians believe the military council is working to slow or reverse gains of the January revolution that facilitated a soft coup that ousted Mubarak.

When they assumed power, the generals vowed to govern the country until an elected government could be established in six months, but they decided later that they needed to remain in control for as long as two years. They were heavily criticized for a deadly crackdown on Coptic Christian demonstrators last month in Cairo that left 26 people dead. And their recent attempts to keep their budget secret and limit the amount of oversight elected officials would have on the armed forces through a constitutional document has fueled concerns that the generals aren't committed to democratic principles.

Speaking to reporters Thursday, two members of the military council were defensive and accused some of the protesters of stirring violence by trying to attack the Interior Ministry building.

After intense prodding about videos and witness accounts that evidenced the brutality of the crackdown, one of the commanders acknowledged that security forces might have overreacted.

"I do not deny that violations have occurred," Maj. Gen. Mukhtar al-Mulla said, adding that videos of the beatings were being studied and investigated. "I'm not saying that the police and armed forces are all angels."

Abdel Moez Ibrahim, the head of the country's judicial election commission, said the government would hold elections as scheduled because they are the "lifeline that will get us through this phase."

Egypt's caretaker government resigned Monday as a result of the unrest.

Meanwhile, prominent Egyptian American columnist Mona Eltahawy, who was detained near Tahrir Square on Wednesday, said in a Twitter message that she was released Thursday after spending 12 hours in detention, during which she said she was beaten and sexually assaulted. Both her arms were broken.

She wrote on Twitter that her captors “groped and prodded my breasts, grabbed my genital area and I lost count how many hands tried to get into my trousers.”

She said being an American citizen probably led to her prompt release.

“The past 12 hrs were painful and surreal but I know I got off much much easier than so many other Egyptians,” she wrote on Twitter. “God knows what wuld’ve happened if I wasn’t dual citizen.”

Protesters continued to erect tents in Tahrir Square on Thursday, where many say they intend to stay until the military chiefs step down. The flurry of communiques and messages from the generals did little to appease the demonstrators, who are treating the struggle as life-or-death.

“Why do they release statements after everything that’s happened?” said Mohammad Said, 21, an accountant. “Why do they wait for everything to be destroyed? Why not release the statements that people want to hear before all the destruction?”

Fonte: The Washington Post, Washington, 25 Nov. 2011, World, online.

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