

Friday, 23 August 2013

Low turnout for pro-Mursi rallies in Egypt



Egypt's military turned out in force as thousands calling for the ousted president's reinstatement held scattered protests across Cairo, but the Muslim Brotherhood failed to bring out huge numbers in a sign that an intense crackdown has dealt a serious blow to the 85-year-old group's support base.

In a day dubbed the "Friday of Martyrs," Islamists in groups of hundreds chanted against the military and held up posters of deposed leader Mohammed Mursi on side streets and outside neighborhood mosques. At least one person was killed in clashes in the Delta city of Tanta, but there was no major fighting.

Thousands marched through the streets of Cairo's Nasr City district, some chanting: "We are willing to sacrifice our lives" and "We promise the martyrs that we will end military rule," in reference to the several hundred people that died in clashes with Egypt's military during raids on street camps this month. One man held aloft a picture of Mursi with the words, "the legitimate president."

But large rallies taking over main streets and squares failed to materialize as armored vehicles and soldiers were deployed outside mosques and other strategic areas. The military also closed off main streets, some flyovers and barricaded Tahrir Square and other plazas in a show of force aimed at preventing the pro-Mursi camp from gathering en masse.

Armored vehicles surrounded the presidential palace and blocked the Rabaah al-Adawiya mosque, where Mursi supporters had held a sit-in for weeks that was violently dispersed on Aug. 14, resulting in the deaths of hundreds.

Show of dissent

Those who did rally avoided major thoroughfares and squares that had been swamped by Mursi supporters in the weeks since he was toppled in a military coup on July 3.

The low turnout signaled the Muslim Brotherhood was having difficulty putting on a large show of dissent after an exceptionally violent week and the arrests of nearly all of the group's senior leaders, including its spiritual guide Mohammed Badie. Another 80 Brotherhood members, including senior leaders and spokesmen, were taken into custody on Thursday, ahead of the planned rallies.

Authorities also have imposed a strictly enforced dusk to dawn curfew over the past week in Cairo and other provinces, emptying streets by nightfall.

It was difficult for the media to even find a Brotherhood official for comment.

Pale in comparison

The protests that did occur paled in comparison to last week's demonstrations when the capital descended into chaos as tens of thousands of Mursi supporters went out in defiance of the military's newly introduced emergency measures. Last Friday, vigilantes at neighborhood checkpoints battled Mursi supporters across the capital in unprecedented clashes between residents that left 82 people dead - 72 civilians and 10 policemen.

One pro-Mursi protester, 47-year-old Mohamed Ahmed, insisted the movement against what the Brotherhood calls an "illegitimate" coup would continue.

"Everybody knows there could be a bloodbath. But as long as we are fighting for our rights, with God's will, we will win," he said as he joined protesters gathering outside a mosque following prayers in Giza, a satellite city of Cairo and home to the famous Pyramids.

"There were many arrests lately among the Brotherhood ranks. The army and the police are killing people so they can impose their will and their power. But they will fail because after the revolution people are not afraid anymore," he added.

Few clashes broke out between the demonstrators and locals who largely pelted each with rocks. Police fired tear gas to stop rival camps from clashing knives and birdshot in the Delta city of Tanta. One pro-Mursi supporter was killed and 26 were injured in the fighting, a local medical official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media.

Mubarak's release

On the other side of the political divide, demonstrations against the release of deposed leader Hosni Mubarak, who was placed under house arrest in a military hospital in southern Cairo, also drew low numbers. Dozens of anti-Mursi and anti-Mubarak protesters held a rally outside Cairo's high court amid tight security.

Mubarak is still facing trial on charges of complicity in the killing of nearly 900 protesters during the 2011 uprising against him. But his release was viewed by many who rebelled against him as a setback in their campaign to hold him accountable for years of abuse and corruption.

But in a sign of the country's deep division, one group that had spearheaded the 2011 revolution against the autocrat called off its rally against Mubarak's release. The April 6 group said it wanted to avoid being joined by pro-Mursi supporters "who may take advantage of (our) mobilization for their own interests."

Mursi was ousted after millions took to the streets to call for him to step down, accusing him of trying to monopolize power, letting his Muslim Brotherhood take over state institutions and ignoring calls for real reform. His defenders counter that he was up against pro-Mubarak officials who conspired to block him, and that the military leadership sought to undermine Egypt's progress toward democracy.

Since Mursi's ouster, hundreds of Egyptians have been killed in the worst bout of violence since 2011.

Despite the standoff, the military-backed interim government pushed ahead with its road map for a post-Mursi political transition. A first draft of an amended version of the now-suspended constitution was finalized and published in local media, the first step toward changing the Islamist-backed charter that fueled opposition to Mursi.

The Brotherhood's political party said on its Facebook page that the Friday rallies were against the coup and were seeking to "recapture" the spirit of the 18-day uprising that ousted Mubarak in 2011. But the numbers remained in the hundreds and thousands by nightfall.

Sit-in symbol

Many protesters raised yellow stickers showing an open palm with four raised fingers, which has become a symbol for the main sit-in that was disbanded violently near the Rabaa al-Adawiya mosque. In northern Cairo, demonstrators raised a banner that read: "Mubarak and his aides acquitted while the Egyptian people are hanged."

Somaya Mahfouz, a member of the Brotherhood political party who took part in a protest in Giza, shouted at passing cars: "Mubarak is coming back to rule us again."

Angrily she said: "What is happening now has nothing to do with the Brotherhood. It is a war against Islam."