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Egyptian Islamists rally for Mursi's return, vow to challenge army



Al Arabiya

Tens of thousands of supporters of ousted president Mohammad Mursi assembled on Friday in Egypt, pledging to keep fighting for his reinstatement, as rival rallies defending his overthrow highlighted the country's political polarization.

Protesters arrived from across the country to gather outside the Rabaa al-Adawiya mosque in the neighborhood of Nasr City in Cairo, vowing allegiance to Mursi and denouncing the army, while holding Egyptian flags and Qurans.

Meanwhile, Egypt's interim President Mansour Adly, along with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, the most prominent Sunni Muslim institution, floated offers for "national reconciliation."

A presidential spokesperson has said the Muslim Brotherhood will be offered posts in Egypt's cabinet, which Newly appointed Prime Minister Hazem el-Beblawi has reportedly promised to finish assembling by next week, a government official told Egypt's state news agency, according to The Associated Press.

The rallies come as the German government asked for the deposed president to be released from custody. Mursi is currently detained at a "safe place, for his safety" and has not yet been charged, according to Egypt's foreign ministry.

"We will continue to resist. We will stay one or two months, or even one or two years. We won't leave here until our president, Mohammad Mursi, comes back," Safwat Hegazi, an influential Islamist leader said to the gathering, according to AFP.

Hegazi demanded that Mursi be reinstated, that immediate parliamentary elections be held and for a committee to supervise a national reconciliation plan.

Demonstrators set up a field kitchen to cook Iftar, the meal eaten after Muslims break their fast in the month of Ramadan. Thousands also gathered outside the University of Cairo, overseen by security forces.

Military forces are staying about a kilometer away to avoid direct confrontations, according to The Associated Press. Despite the size of the protests, Egypt's interim authorities continue to start a new government amid support from Gulf states to prop up the ailing economy.

The United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have offered \$12bn of aid since Mursi was overthrown.

The Muslim Brotherhood from which Mursi hails is now in decline in the country, with many of its leaders arrested or in hiding following the ousted president's overthrow on July 3, which the Brotherhood and many of its supporters regard as a military coup.

Rival protests

Rival movements against Mursi have also called for large demonstrations after Friday in Cairo's Tahrir Square and at the Ittihadiya presidential palace, with a mass Iftar planned.

"Our existence in the streets today was necessary to protect the legitimacy [of the June 30 uprising]," Doaa Khalifa, of the Tamarod (rebel group), told Al Arabiya.

In Tahrir Square, several dozen demonstrators congregated at midday, expecting more to join later.

"It is because of the heat and Ramadan, when we have a fast. During the day, people stay at home but this evening, people will come to Tahrir," Gamal, 48, told AFP.

The rival rallies have increased tension and raised expectations of rising violence since Mursi's ouster, after millions of demonstrators demanded that he step down.

Earlier this week, clashes at an army building in Cairo killed 53 people, mostly pro-Mursi demonstrators.

The military says soldiers were attacked by "terrorists" and armed protesters, while the Brotherhood accuses the army of "massacring" demonstrators. On Friday, gunmen in the city of Ismailia on the Suez Canal killed a policeman and wounded an officer in an attempt to stop a vehicle the armed group was travelling in, MENA reported on Friday, according to AFP.

The militants escaped, but were being pursued by security forces, General Mohamed Eid, Ismailiya's police chief, told MENA.

Egypt's Sinai peninsula, where many Red Sea resorts are located, has been hit by a wave of violence, with gunmen killing a police officer in a rocket attack on a checkpoint early on Friday, according to officials.

Earlier in the week, two people died in an attack on a security checkpoint in the Sinai.

On Thursday, a Coptic Christian man was found decapitated after being kidnapped.

The public prosecutor has pressed charges against 200 of 650 people detained during the violence on Monday.

A U.S. State Department spokesperson said that the arrests were "not in line with the national reconciliation" the interim government and army say they want, adding that if the arrest continued "it is hard to see how Egypt will move beyond this crisis," according to AFP.

The German foreign ministry spokesman said a "trusted institution" such as the International Committee of Red Cross should be able to visit Mursi.

"We and our partners are of the opinion that any appearance of selective justice in Egypt must be avoided and there must be no political persecution," he said, according to AFP.

Election timetable

Adly Mansour, Egypt's current interim president appointed by the army, has set a timetable for elections by early next year.

But many Mursi opponents and supporters have criticized the interim charter Mansour issued earlier this week to replace the current constitution that was drafted by Islamists, and to guide a transition that the even the army has said will be "difficult."

Many feel that the errors of the last army-led transition, between Hosni Mubarak's overthrow in 2011 and Mursi's free-and-fair election in mid-2012.

(With AFP and Reuters)