

Protests continue as Egypt PM tasked with reforms
Malaysiakini.com
January 31, 2011

Egypt's embattled President Hosni Mubarak tasked his new prime minister to ram through democratic reforms as thousands of protesters in central Cairo defied a military curfew to demand the veteran leader's ouster.

His instructions to Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq were read out on state television but had no discernable effect on protesters who vowed to continue their demonstrations until Mubarak stepped down.

Mubarak, who sacked his cabinet on Friday after a nationwide revolt, also said the new prime minister's priority was restricting unemployment and creating new jobs.

"Above all that, and concurrent with it, I emphasise the importance of urgently, completely, effectively taking new and continuous steps for more political reforms, constitutional and legislative, through dialogue with all parties," Mubarak told Shafiq.

He also instructed the new cabinet, whose members have not yet been named, to restrict unemployment, end corruption and restore trust in the country's economy.

Thousands of protesters stayed put in Tahrir Square, the epicentre of demonstrations in the capital, with some setting up tents to stay overnight despite a military curfew.

Top dissident Mohamed ElBaradei earlier told a sea of angry protesters in the square that they were beginning a new era after the six day revolt.

The Nobel laureate, who was mandated by Egyptian opposition groups including the banned Muslim Brotherhood to negotiate with Mubarak's regime, hailed "a new Egypt in which every Egyptian lives in freedom and dignity."

"We are on the right path, our strength is in our numbers," ElBaradei said in his first address on Tahrir square. "I ask you to be patient, change is coming."

"We will sacrifice our soul and our blood for the nation," the angry crowd shouted. "The people want to topple the president."

At least 125 protestors dead

Brotherhood leaders Essam el-Erian and Saad el-Katatni, who walked out of prison earlier on Sunday after their guards fled, also addressed the crowd.

"They tried every way to stop the revolution of the people but we will be steadfast regardless of how many martyrs fall," Erian said.

The protests against Mubarak's three-decade rule have shaken Egypt and left at least 125 people dead as the veteran leader clings to power.

A curfew slapped on Cairo, Alexandria and Suez on Friday was further extended on Sunday

from 3pm to 8am, state television said, leaving citizens only seven hours a day to take to the street.

Mubarak has struggled to placate a nation angry at his three decades of autocratic rule with token gestures such as sacking the government.

Parliament speaker Fathi Surur on Sunday made another concession, saying the results of last year's fraud-tainted parliamentary elections would be revised.

Several foreign governments said they would evacuate their nationals, while the United States authorised the departure of embassy families.

Mubarak on Sunday met with army brass seen as holding the key to his future as warplanes roared low over the downtown Cairo protest in an apparent show of force.

State television said he visited central military command where he met his newly appointed vice president, Omar Suleiman, the intelligence chief.

Mubarak, a former air force chief, appeared to be bolstering his army support as he faces down the revolt.

Washington, a key ally of Egypt, called on Mubarak to do more to defuse the crisis but stopped short of saying he should quit.

But President Barack Obama also voiced support for "an orderly transition to a government that is responsive to the aspirations of the Egyptian people," in calls to regional leaders on Saturday, the White House said.

Police deliberately released prisoners

With fears of insecurity rising, thousands of convicts broke out of prisons across Egypt overnight after they overwhelmed guards or after prison personnel fled their posts.

An AFP correspondent saw 14 bodies in a mosque near Cairo's Abu Zaabal prison, which a resident said were of two police and 12 convicts.

Troops set up checkpoints on roads to riot-hit prisons, stopping and searching cars for prisoners on the run.

Among those who escaped were senior members of the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as members of Palestinian Islamist group Hamas, some of whom made it back to the Gaza Strip through smuggling tunnels.

With rampant pillaging during the deadly protests, many Egyptians believe the police deliberately released prisoners in order to spread chaos and emphasise the need for the security forces.

"The government wants the people to think that Mubarak is the only option faced with the chaos," said young demonstrator Sameh Kamal.

Groups of club-carrying vigilantes have deployed on Cairo's streets to protect property from looters amid growing insecurity as the Arab world's most populous nation faced an uncertain future.

Youths handed over suspected looters to the army, as police who had battled stone-throwing protesters in the first days of the demonstrations were hardly visible.

Many petrol stations are running out of fuel, motorists said, and many bank cash machines have either been looted or no longer work. Egyptian banks and the stock exchange were ordered closed on Sunday.

Protesters dismissed Mubarak's new appointments as too little and too late.

Both men are stalwarts of Egypt's all-powerful military establishment.

Obama not cutting off aid

Suleiman, 75, has spearheaded years of Egyptian efforts to clinch an elusive Israeli-Palestinian peace deal, and tried so far in vain to mediate an inter-Palestinian reconciliation.

Shafiq, 69, is respected by the elite, even among the opposition, and has often been mooted as a potential successor to Mubarak.

In Washington, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called for an "orderly transition" in Egypt but stopped short of demanding that he step down.

Asked if Mubarak had taken sufficient steps to defuse Egypt's worst crisis in decades by appointing a vice president and naming a new premier, Clinton told ABC: "Of course not."

"That is the beginning, the bare beginning of what needs to happen, which is a process that leads to the kind of concrete steps to achieve democratic and economic reform that we've been urging."

The Obama administration, she added, has not discussed cutting off aid to Egypt, a key Arab ally.

US military aid to Egypt amounts to \$1.3 billion a year, and the total American aid bill to the country averages close to \$2 billion annually.

- AFP