

A year since Mubarak ousted, strike call shows divisions

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CAIRO, Feb 12 — Egypt marked the first anniversary of the popular overthrow of Hosni Mubarak yesterday, but a poor turnout for a strike called by activists to protest the slow pace of change from military rule laid bare the country's deep divisions.

The general strike, called to press demands for the immediate departure of the military council that replaced Mubarak, failed to cause major disruption. It was opposed by religious figures and political groups, including the Islamists who dominate parliament.

It was business as usual at Cairo's railway station and airport. Buses and the metro ran as normal and an official said the strike call had no impact on the Suez Canal, the waterway linking Europe to Asia and a vital source of revenue for Egypt.

"We are hungry and we have to feed our children," said bus driver Ahmed Khalil, explaining why he was not taking part in the labour action called by liberal and leftist groups, together with some student and independent trade unions.

"I have to come here every morning and work. I don't care if there is a strike or civil disobedience," he said.

Hailed as heroes a year ago for helping to unseat Mubarak, the army has faced growing criticism for its management of Egypt since assuming power at the culmination of 18 days of mass protests fuelled by poverty and demands for democratic government.

After Tunisia's Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, Mubarak was the second leader to fall in the wave of protests known as the "Arab Spring." His political demise helped galvanise other Arab revolts including the one now challenging the Syrian government.

Though Egypt's generals have pledged to hand power to an elected president by mid-year, the protest groups which ignited the anti-Mubarak uprising doubt their intentions, seeing them as an extension of his rule and an obstacle to real democracy.

A year after hundreds of thousands of people packed into Tahrir Square to celebrate the end of Mubarak's three-decade rule, Egypt faces a more divided picture.

Many have grown tired of street action and are urging a more patient approach, arguing Egypt needs stability to allow the recovery of an economy battered by a year of turmoil.

State-run media rallied behind a campaign against the strike call. "The nation rejects civil disobedience," read the headline in Al-Ahram, a widely circulated state-owned newspaper.

At Cairo's main railway station, banners echoed the theme. "Train drivers and their assistants refuse civil disobedience," read one. A minister in the army-appointed cabinet said those calling for strikes would be "held to account."

While Saturday's call for action failed to make an impact, one of the activist groups expected more strikes in the coming days. "Today is the first real step toward civil

disobedience," said Mohamed Abdel Aziz, coordinator of the Kefaya movement.

The army deployed extra soldiers and tanks to protect state buildings and public property in the build-up to Saturday's anniversary.

Top US military official meets generals

Headed by former president Mubarak's long-time defence minister, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces says it has no interest in governing the Arab world's most populous country.

In recent weeks, the generals have been tested by a crisis in ties with the United States triggered by an investigation into US-based democracy groups working in Egypt — a case endangering Egypt's annual US\$1.3 billion (RM3.93 billion) in US military aid.

Foreigners including some 20 Americans face charges including working for groups that were not properly licensed. Banned from leaving Egypt, an undisclosed number of Americans involved in the case have taken shelter at the U.S. embassy.

General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, discussed the case with Tantawi and chief of staff General Sami Anan in Cairo Saturday.

"They discussed a wide range of issues related to the long-standing security relationship between our two countries, including the issue involving US NGOs," Colonel David Lapan, a spokesman for Dempsey, told Reuters in a statement.

The military council warned Friday that Egypt was "subject to plots that aim to hit the revolution at its core and sow strife between Egyptian people and between them and their armed forces."

In an effort to rally public support, posters stuck to the side of armoured vehicles declared "the army and the people are one hand" — a slogan chanted in Tahrir Square the day Mubarak stepped down a year ago.

The army's transition plans have mostly been supported by the Muslim Brotherhood and the Nour Party, the Islamist groups which between them dominated the recent parliamentary vote.

Such an outcome would have been unthinkable under Mubarak, who mostly saw Islamists as enemies of the state.

The Brotherhood came out in opposition to the strike call, saying it would cause further damage to the economy.

However Brotherhood criticism of the military-led authorities has grown in the wake of a February 1 soccer stadium disaster in which at least 74 people were killed. A Brotherhood spokesman Friday said the incident should have forced the military-appointed government out of office. — Reuters

Source: <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/world/article/a-year-since-mubarak-ousted-strike-call-shows-divisions/>