

The Arab Domino Effect -- Egypt follows Tunisia

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Police Battle Huge Protests Across Egypt

CAIRO — Violent protest spread across Cairo and other Egyptian cities on Friday as tens of thousands of demonstrators intensified their campaign to oust President Hosni Mubarak, pouring from mosques after noon prayers and clashing with police who fired tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannons.



Mubarak and Obama, servants of the ruling Plutocracy

The protests came after weeks of turmoil across the Arab world that toppled one leader in Tunisia and encouraged protesters to overcome deep-rooted fears of their autocratic leaders and take to the streets. But Egypt is a special case — a heavyweight in Middle East diplomacy, in part because of its peace treaty with Israel, and a key ally of the United States. The country, often the fulcrum on which currents in the region turn, also has one of the most largest and most sophisticated security forces in the Middle East.

In what protesters called a “day of wrath,” a crowd of at least 10,000 people moved east from Cairo’s Mohandeseen neighborhood, trying to reach the central Tahrir Square that has been an epicenter of protest. The demonstrations were on a scale far beyond anything in the memory of most residents.

Near Tahrir Square, protesters set fire to a police truck as police lobbed tear gas to try to block access to a key bridge across the River Nile from the island of Zamalek. Some demonstrators stamped on photographs of the president and others chanted “Down, down with Mubarak.” The acrid stench of tear gas spread across the capital reaching up the windows of high-rise buildings. Television images showed plainclothes security policemen beating protesters.

At Al Azhar in old Cairo, thousands of people poured from one of the most iconic mosques of Sunni Islam, chanting “The people want to bring down the regime.” The police fired tear gas and protesters hurled rocks as they sought to break through police lines. From balconies above the street, residents threw water and lemons to protesters whose eyes were streaming from tear gas.

Similar demonstrations were also reported in the cities of Suez, Alexandria and several others, including Al Arish in northern Sinai and Mansour in the Nile Delta region.

Egyptian security officials said they had placed the most prominent opposition figures, Mohammed ElBaradei, under house arrest. Shortly before, police doused Mr. ElBaradei with a water cannon and beat supporters who tried to shield him. Mr. ElBaradei, the former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, returned to Egypt on Thursday, promising to join the largely leaderless protests that have so far been propelled by young people.

Internet and cellphone connections have been disrupted or restricted in Cairo, Alexandria and other places, cutting off social-media Web sites that had been used to organize protests and complicating efforts by the news media to report on events on the ground. Some reports said journalists had been singled out by police who used batons to beat and charge protesters.

One cellphone operator, Vodafone, said on Friday that Egypt had told all mobile operators to suspend services in selected areas of the country. Vodafone, a British company, said it would comply with the order, Reuters reported.

In Alexandria, as soon as Friday prayers ended, a crowd of protesters streamed out of one mosque, chanting "Wake up, wake up son of my country. Come down Egyptians."

Police there closed on the crowd, firing tear gas as the demonstrators pelted them with stones. A stone struck the officer firing the gas from the top of the truck and the truck pulled back, but reinforcements quickly arrived and officers marshaled a new offensive.

The protest in Alexandria turned into a block-by-block battle. The riot police managed to push the demonstrators one block back from the mosque, sealing it off from both sides and slowly advancing behind the tear-gas truck.

Several women shouted "dirty government," leaning from the balconies of their high-rise apartments to hurl bottles down on the police. Officers pounded their clear shields with their billy clubs and chanted in unison.

Then, almost incredibly, a more than two-hour pitched street battle ended with protesters and police officers shaking hands and sharing water bottles on the same street corner where minutes before they were exchanging hails of stones and tear-gas canisters were arcing through the sky. Thousands stood on the six-lane coastal road then sank to their knees and prayed.

"We wanted this to be a peaceful demonstration, but we are all Egyptians," said Ahmed Mohammed Saleh, 26, a protester in Alexandria who had been struck by a rubber bullet.

In Cairo, too, an eerie silence fell in one section of the city at midafternoon, as hundreds of protesters began a prayer session in the middle of the street, according to live images from Al Jazeera, the Qatar-based satellite channel. Protesters bowed their heads as smoke billowed into the air behind them from the skirmishes between demonstrators and riot police.

Despite predictions otherwise, there were only sporadic protests elsewhere in the region. The Yemeni capital of Sana, where thousands had gathered a day before, was quiet Friday. Across the Middle East, attention seemed focused on Egypt, the Arab world's most populous country. Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, the most influential Arab satellite channels, broadcast nonstop coverage of the demonstrations in Cairo.

"It has blown up in Egypt," read the front page of Al Akhbar, an influential leftist daily newspaper in Beirut. "Today all eyes are focused on the mosques in the land of Egypt, where the protests are

expected to reach their peak.”

The protests across Egypt have underscored the blistering pace of events that have transformed the Arab world, particularly among regimes that have traditionally enjoyed the support of successive administrations in Washington.

Earlier this month, entrenched autocracies seemed confident of their ability to ride out the protests. But, just two weeks ago, on Jan. 14, President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia fled abruptly into exile after weeks of protest, and his departure emboldened demonstrators to take to the streets in other countries.

Images of the lowly challenging the mighty have been relayed from one capital to the next, partly through the aggressive coverage of Al Jazeera. Social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter have given the protesters a potent weapon, enabling them to elude the traditional police measures to monitor and curb dissent. But various regimes have fallen back on a more traditional playbook, relying on security forces to face angry demonstrators on the streets.

On Thursday, the Muslim Brotherhood, which had remained formally aloof from the earlier protests, seemed to be seeking to align itself with the youthful and apparently secular demonstrators, saying it would support Friday’s protests. But it was unclear what role the Brotherhood had played in Friday’s protests, which seemed to be spearheaded by angry young people and to include a cross-section of Egyptians. Even some of the capital’s smartest neighborhoods such as Zamalek and Madi were caught up in the turmoil.

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The shot that turned a Protest into a nationwide Revolt

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/29/world/middleeast/29unrest.html>

Cleaves Alternative News. <http://cleaves.lingama.net/news/story-2300.html>