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## Mass protests in Egypt against military rule

By Peter Symonds

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An estimated 50,000 people took part in protests in Cairo's Tahrir Square yesterday against last Thursday's coup and the establishment of a military dictatorship by Egypt's Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). Another sizable demonstration took place in the port city of Alexandria.

After dissolving the Islamist-dominated parliament last Thursday, SCAF issued a constitutional decree on Sunday granting itself sweeping powers. The decree was issued immediately after the conclusion of the presidential election run-off.

The powers stipulated in the decree include control over all budgetary and legislative matters and control of the country's constituent assembly, which is in charge of drawing up a constitution, as well as complete command over the armed forces and their deployment to suppress "internal unrest." The security forces have already been deployed to enforce what amounts to martial law.

These measures transform the next president into an impotent figurehead for the military junta. Results of the presidential run-off between Ahmed Shafiq, the last prime minister under ousted President Hosni Mubarak, and Mohamed Mursi of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood are due to be announced Thursday. The two are right-wing representatives of rival factions of Egypt's ruling elite.

Yesterday's protest was called by the Muslim Brotherhood in a bid to politically control widespread popular anger over SCAF's authoritarian moves and to exploit this opposition to

pressure the military chiefs for a political accommodation. The Islamists, along with the various liberal and pseudo-left organisations that joined yesterday's demonstration, have all promoted the illusion that SCAF and the military will allow a "democratic transition" to civilian rule.

While many who took to the streets were supporters and members of the Muslim Brotherhood, the demonstrations reflected broader public outrage over the military's actions. The protesters chanted "Down with military rule!"; "Military rule again, no way! We're the power, we're the people!" and "You coward Field Marshal, free the parliament!"

Galal Osman told the *Christian Science Monitor*, "This is a military coup against the people. We want the president that we elected to have all the powers of his office. We want to write the constitution without the military interfering. You can't have 19 unelected men subverting the will of the people."

Speaking to the Associated Press, Mohammed Abdel-Hameed said, "It is not possible to have a revolution and then have military rule and a president with no authority. If they want blood, we are ready to offer blood. So that my son can live free."

Popular anger over the military's actions was compounded by news that Mubarak was being moved out of jail on medical grounds. Many people are highly sceptical of prison reports that his health is deteriorating rapidly. Mubarak was jailed on June 2 after being convicted of failing to stop the killing of protesters last year.

The ongoing protests in Tahrir Square are likely to escalate tomorrow if SCAF's preferred candidate Shafiq is declared the winner of the election. Both sides claimed victory yesterday in the wake of Sunday's run-off.

While posturing as democrats at the protest, Muslim Brotherhood leaders are seeking to cut a deal with the military that would allow Mursi to function as its figurehead. Spokesman Yasser Ali told a press conference: "Why do we rush to the word 'confrontation?' We do not seek any confrontation with anyone. No one in Egypt wants confrontation... There has to be dialogue between national forces."

The Muslim Brotherhood does not represent the Egyptian working class and rural masses, but a layer of the bourgeoisie and upper-middle classes whose economic interests were stymied by decades of repressive military rule. Despite their bitter differences, SCAF and the Islamists share a common fear that further social and political upheaval would be a threat to bourgeois rule.

In his appeal for dialogue, Islamist spokesman Ali is calling for a continuation of the de-facto coalition with the military junta over the past year that suppressed the revolutionary movement that toppled Mubarak in February 2011.

SCAF's coup, however, indicates that the military has decided to dispense with the political services of the Muslim Brotherhood, which could again be made illegal. Yesterday, a court adjourned a case calling for the dissolution of the Islamist organisation for not taking the necessary steps to obtain recognition by the state.

There are real fears in ruling circles in Egypt and internationally that the military's actions could provoke a political upheaval that the Muslim Brotherhood and the various liberal and ex-left organisations might not be able to control.

The country's EGX30 share index fell by 4.6 percent yesterday, the largest one-day drop since November 22, when security forces attacked protesters, leaving dozens dead.

Said Hirsh of Capital Economics said Monday: "Recent developments will probably increase the risk of further social unrest and crush any hope of a change in economic policy. But in the extreme, this could lead to a second revolution and thus a longer period of political uncertainty."

The security forces will undoubtedly be out in force tomorrow as the election result is announced and protests in Tahrir Square continue.