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Egypt: Arrests of Kefaya movement leaders, investigation needed into police killings

The arrests of Kefaya movement leaders George Ishak and Fathi al-Hefnawy following protest demonstrations this week in which two people were killed by police, represents a deeply disturbing development, Amnesty International said today.

"The government clamped down on the main opposition Muslim Brotherhood in the run up to last Tuesday's local and municipal elections, arresting hundreds and preventing all but a handful of Muslim Brotherhood candidates from standing," said Amnesty International. "Now, it seems to be trying to pin the blame for the violent protests of the last few days on the Kefaya movement."

The government banned all demonstrations on 5 April, three days before the elections and in advance of a general strike planned for 6 April in support of industrial action by textile workers in Mahalla, some 120 km north of Cairo. Thousands of police and security forces were deployed in Mahalla, Cairo and other cities. But this failed to prevent protests in Mahalla, which became violent as police clashed with people protesting rising living costs. Protests also quickly spread to other cities.

At least two people were killed in Mahalla, apparently by police gunfire. Ahmed Ali Mubarak, 15, is reported to have been hit by two bullets while watching the clashes from the balcony of his home in Mahalla on 8 April, and 20-year-old Ahmed El-Sayyed Abdelqader died as a result of wounds he sustained when police dispersed demonstrators two days earlier. In all, more than 100 people are reported to have been injured in the Mahalla protests, including members of the security forces.

"The authorities should order an immediate and independent investigation into the use of force by police during the protests, to establish whether it was excessive," said Amnesty International. "In particular, there must be a thorough investigation into the two deaths which occurred."

George Ishak and Fathi al-Hefnawy, both leading members of the opposition Kefaya movement, were arrested at their homes on 9 April and charged by the Emergency State Security Prosecution with inciting others to demonstrate, commit assaults on people and property and use violence with the aim of affecting public authorities. It is not clear when they will stand trial.

It was the Kefaya movement, along with other opposition groups, that called for a general strike on 6 April in support of action by textile workers in Mahalla who, however, called off their planned strike after negotiations with officials and under pressure from the government. Even so, violent protests broke out in the city on 6 and 7 April against the rising cost of living.

Security forces used excessive force and live ammunition as it clamped down on demonstrators. They used sticks to beat demonstrators and tear gas, and fired rubber bullets and live ammunition in the air to disperse protesters.

Amnesty International has urged President Hosni Mubarak to instruct security forces in Egypt not to use excessive force or live ammunition with demonstrators.

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