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Egypt: Emergency law biggest threat to rights since ‘25 January revolution’

The Egyptian military authorities’ expansion of the emergency law is the greatest erosion of human rights since the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak earlier this year, Amnesty International said today.

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) broadened the application of the Mubarak-era emergency law early this week following clashes between demonstrators and security forces at the Israeli embassy last Friday. The confrontation resulted in three reported deaths and some 130 arrests.

Restricted in 2010 to terrorism and drug crimes, the emergency law has now reverted to its original scope and been expanded to cover offences that include disturbing traffic, blocking roads, broadcasting rumours, possessing and trading in weapons, and “assault on freedom to work” according to official statements.

“These changes are a major threat to the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly, and the right to strike,” Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa. “We are looking at the most serious erosion of human rights in Egypt since Mubarak stepped down.”

“The military authorities have essentially taken Egypt’s laws back to the bad old days. Even President Mubarak limited the scope of the emergency law to terrorism and drug offences in May last year,” said Philip Luther.

The amendments have triggered calls for mass protests tomorrow in Cairo’s Tahrir Square and other cities to demand the lifting of the three-decade long state of emergency before November parliamentary elections.

“We are urging the Egyptian authorities to respect the rights of demonstrators to protest peacefully tomorrow,” said Philip Luther. “We fear that the security forces will interpret these amendments as a sign that they have been ‘let off the leash’.”

Under Hosni Mubarak, the emergency law was used to suppress opposition and dissent, and became a byword for government abuses of power and human rights violations by state security forces.

Those arrested under the emergency law are tried before special courts known as (Emergency) Supreme State Security Courts, which, like military courts, violate the right to a fair trial and deny defendants the right to appeal. The law also gives security forces virtually unrestrained powers of search, arrest and detention.

“It is disturbing to see that the security forces are being given yet again the same powers that they abused with such impunity before,” said Philip Luther. “These sweeping powers have been the cause of Egypt’s worst human rights abuses over the last 30 years.”

“Not only must the SCAF repeal these amendments, they need to end the state of emergency altogether, as they promised upon taking power in February.”