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Day of the Thugs

The surreal crackdown on Tahrir Square leaves a lot of questions unanswered.

BY ASHRAF KHALIL | FEBRUARY 2, 2011



CAIRO — Feb. 2 actually started out as a pretty good day for the anti-government protesters still massed in Tahrir Square. The usual festive mood and sense of community reigned after another chilly night outdoors. When Internet service abruptly returned around noon, the good news spread throughout the crowd. It was taken as a sign that the government's grip was weakening and the tide was turning toward a resolution of the weeklong standoff with President Hosni Mubarak.

That turned out to be a gross miscalculation. By nightfall, the streets around Tahrir were littered with wounded protesters who were frightened, enraged, shell shocked, and desperately short of medical supplies.

The first sign that things were about to tip badly into darkness came shortly after the Internet returned. I was in a taxi with a group of journalists heading to opposition leader Mohamed ElBaradei's home on the outskirts of Cairo to attempt an interview. From the other direction came what looked like a 1,000-person march of pro-Mubarak supporters chanting slogans like "We love the president" and "He's not going." Many of the protesters were riding horses and camels -- from the looks of them, many appeared to be tourist touts coming from the stables clustered around the Pyramids on the outskirts of Cairo. At the time, my colleagues and I thought it made for a great journalistic visual; we snapped a few pictures and furiously started scribbling in our notebooks. Within hours, those horses and camels had been used in a bizarre, medieval mounted charge into the unarmed civilians occupying Tahrir.

The pro-Mubarak rallies that have turned the protests into a street war started late on Feb. 1, clustered around the Information Ministry, about a 10-minute walk from Tahrir. A group of roughly 500 had organized a rally there, in full view of the state and Western media outlets that have their offices on that block. It

was a clever tactic, serving two main purposes: It allowed the state media to film the rally from upstairs and broadcast an endless loop of citizens declaring their love for the president; and it enabled the protesters to essentially hijack a number of prominent Western news broadcasts.

Around 5 a.m. on Wednesday morning, I watched as the pro-Mubarak crowd noted the studio lights of a live shot in progress from a balcony, and then gathered below to loudly chant pro-Mubarak slogans. I observed for a moment and then walked away with a sort of bemused respect for the enduring craftiness of the supporters of Mubarak's regime. But by the time I made it back to Tahrir around 3 p.m. on Wednesday, the scene there couldn't have been more different from the euphoria of the preceding days. The protesters in the square were being besieged, and I saw dozens of bloodied young men staggering or being carried away from the front lines.

Crowds of rock-throwing, pro-Mubarak protesters were attempting to overrun the Tahrir crowds, who were fending them off with their own barrages of rocks and cement chunks. Tahrir is a huge public space with at least nine major entry points, and the pro-Mubarak crowds continued to probe the edges, seeking a soft way in. Protest leaders with megaphones organized the defenses, summoning teams of youths to block different intersections. I saw a middle-aged man walk past with blood streaming from the back of his head; a veiled woman held his arm and guided his steps, hysterically repeating, "We won't die. God is with us. We won't die."

As the fighting ebbed back and forth from about 2 p.m. until early evening, the anti-Mubarak protesters became increasingly paranoid and angry. They were convinced that their attackers were largely made up of plainclothes officers from the police and State Security -- basically the revenge-seeking remnants of the police state that had melted away last week after Mubarak called in the Army.

But the anti-Mubarak protesters were determined not to break ranks and remain vigilant against the threat of infiltration by provocateurs. In previous days, the Army and volunteers had set up egress checkpoints, checking IDs and searching protesters for weapons, but on Feb. 2 it was much more aggressive. All people approaching the square were repeatedly frisked and forced to show their national ID card -- which would show on the back whether the holder was employed by the Interior Ministry. As far as the protesters were concerned, anyone with an Interior Ministry connection was a thug. I watched as one man was apparently unmasked as an Interior Ministry employee; a group of young men nearly killed him before others dragged them off. The bloodied man was then turned over to the Army. One protest leader read off the names and ID card numbers of alleged undercover security officers the crowd had detained.

Much is still unclear, but Feb. 2's violence is likely to intensify questions about the stance of the Army, whose behavior was at the very least puzzling -- and potentially very suspicious. Just before the clashes started, an Army spokesman released a statement appealing to the protesters to return home and allow normal daily life to resume.

The soldiers sitting on their tanks seemed to be passively observing the battle despite desperate pleas from the Tahrir protesters. One man seized the microphone and issued an angry call to the troops: "Make a decision now" and defend the peaceful protesters, he shouted. But other protesters were keen to maintain harmonious relations with the Army, long viewed as the protector of the people. As the man's criticisms of the military grew more strident, others wrested the microphone from his hand. One youth yelled at him, "We don't want to turn the people against the Army!"

The government's motivations at this point are truly mysterious. If it did indeed plan this as a sort of street-power move, why would it restore the Internet two hours beforehand, enabling besieged protesters to send a barrage of frantic and chilling tweets from the maelstrom?

As I left the square, a middle-age man saw my notebook and asked frantically, "Are people coming? Do you know? Are the youth coming to help us?"

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Ashraf Khalil is a Cairo-based journalist who has covered the Middle East since 1997.

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JMDORSEY

7:50 PM ET

February 2, 2011

Day of the thugs

The coming hours could determine whether embattled Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's opponents and particularly the ultras, fanatic soccer fans of rival Cairo clubs Al Ahly and Al Zamalek, have the wherewithal to fight the apparently trained pro-Mubarak forces.

The ultras are one of the few, if not the only group among Mubarak's opponents, that not only have an organization but are battle-hardened street fighters as opponents and supporters of Mubarak gear up for a major confrontation in downtown Cairo.

<http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/2011/02/soccer-fans-key-to-imminent-cairo.html>

SAMI JAMIL**JADALLAH**

7:13 AM ET

February 3, 2011

Egyptian Army, not the army of the people.

That was expected from a government of crooks and thieves and thugs. Letting the thugs lose came after Mubarak message of contempt for the people were he spoke of "order and security" only for his minister of interior to let lose his gangs of thugs together with "baltajia" who were bought by the ruling party and key businessmen for a sandwich and \$10 ..The surprising this is the silence and cooperation of the army with the these thugs. Thugs on horses and camels armed with sticks guns and molotov cocktails were allowed to come in knowing there will be blood. The army, the claim protector of the people proved once again, it is not the army of the people but the army of Mubarak and his thugs. Shame on the Egyptian army, a shame that is equal to their poor performance in the 67 War. Mubarak will go and the people of Egypt will remain. We hope they do not fall into the traps of false promises... the people revolution must continue til Mubarak, Suleiman, Sorour and of Mubarak gangs are out of office and in front of court room to face trials for crimes committed against the people for so long.

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