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Egyptian demonstrators say they 'will not be silenced'

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Anti-government protesters throw stones at Supporters of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, during rioting in Tahrir Square in Cairo Feb. 3. (CNS photo/Goran Tomasevic, Reuters)

Even with the recent outbreak of violence on the streets of Cairo, demonstrators calling for the removal of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak will ?not be silenced,? says Philip Rizk, a filmmaker and blogger [1] who has been assisting foreign journalists in their coverage of the unrest.

Rizk, who has been working with a Swiss TV crew, spoke to *NCR* today after he had been holed up in an office for fear of his safety.

Following is *NCR*'s interview with Rizk, which caught him recovering from the events of the day and looking ahead to tomorrow, which protesters have set as the deadline for Mubarak to step down.

The conversation has been edited for clarity.

***NCR*: Can you tell me what?s happening to you? Why do you think protestors came to your door?**

Rizk: As I am half German, half Egyptian, Egyptians don?t always recognize me as Egyptian and are skeptical about my identity. Since yesterday, there have been masses on the street targeting foreigners because of state propaganda. On the TV and radio, they have been saying that foreign journalists are spreading false information about Egypt, that many of the foreigners are spies, working for Israel or Iran. So there is this massive hysteria around people who look foreign.

I had a very hard time getting to the building where I needed to go. When I got upstairs, [colleagues] told me that pro-government supporters were coming up, targeting the office. I was there locked inside for about an hour and a half with the thugs at the door. The staff inside were ready for full out battle. We heard that other places -- offices, apartments -- had been stormed by thugs.

I was in the building until the army intervened. As far as I know, the army intervened and forced these thugs to

move on.

I was just on the phone with a friend of mine in Tahrir Square -- Freedom Square, as it is called. There is gunfire coming from all directions and my friend was just hit in the head by a stone. Since yesterday, pro-Mubarak supporters are throwing stones, throwing Molotov cocktails at these anti-government demonstrators. The situation on the street is very volatile.

Some observers are saying this show of force by pro-Mubarak demonstrators is an effort to shut down demonstrations by Friday, the day of the next scheduled large gathering.

That?s been their intention ever since it started. I don?t know how well they will succeed, but that has been their intention.

A lot of the [effort] is coordinated. Part of it is because of state propaganda that is getting people riled up and on the streets against foreigners and anti-government protestors. Part of these mobs that are moving around town are actually members of the police force now in plain clothes. They are also thugs paid by the police force, drugged and paid -- and armed -- and then sent loose.

This is a very usual tactic in Egypt. It might sound strange to the U.S. but this is a very usual tactic the government has constantly used on demonstrations as long as I have been around.

Are there plans for another mass demonstration? How are people going forward with that?

Every day there are mass convergences on Tahrir Square. At night, the numbers dwindle. Every morning, the [anti-Mubarak] demonstrators are back out there. Even after the violence we experienced yesterday, the numbers were back up during the day today. We do expect a higher turn-out tomorrow.

Was this turmoil of the last week and a half long in the making for a while or sudden?

There has been an increase wave of protests ever since 2006. It started in the labor sector, where we had a labor strike of over 20,000 workers in one labor town in the Delta. That really started a wave of demonstrations across the country, and across the region, I think. It actually affected some of what led to the uprising in Tunis and that then influenced the region again and is spreading across the region -- in Yemen, Jordan, Tunisia, and Algeria. So this is something that has been growing.

But you can never quite predict when the moment, when the spark will be started. It was sparked here last week.

What are the stakes here for the people involved? What happens if the people calling for Mubarak?s ouster fail?

They are not only calling for the president to step down but for his regime to be ousted. They are not content with a new figurehead while everything remains in place. What this call is based on is a protest against increasing food prices -- a protest against poverty, unemployment, a poor health insurance system.

It is a call against the poor education system in the country and that is what has lead to the final, unified call for an end to this regime. A lot of people might not go into the details of what this means or know what the structural reasons for this are.

The way I see it is this is an uprising against the failure of capitalism, especially a crony capitalism that is implemented here -- where businesses are extremely exploitative of the labor force, where most laborers are making something between 20 and 100 dollars a month -- which they simply cannot survive on -- while the economy is growing.

The economy is becoming stronger every year. There is money flowing into this country, but it is limited to a very specific elite that is either in the government itself, or is in business partnering with members of the parliament.

What are the risks here for people speaking out against this regime, especially if Mubarak holds onto power?

They are risking the same thing they have been risking for years. Anyone who participates in this kind of demonstration, in this kind of organized protest -- whether it is in writing, whether it is in protesting on the street, whether it is in organizing this kind of action -- they are risking their lives, in a certain sense.

People are often arrested. They are kidnapped. They are tortured. They are taken from their homes. And we have seen that. This late afternoon, one of the offices of [Egypt?s] main human rights organizations was stormed. Eight of the employees were kidnapped. We don?t know when we will hear from them, or if we?ll hear from them.

[Pro-Mubarak supporters] started using live fire on the demonstrators last night to try to scare them off. This means this [uprising] costs lives. A lot of the people in Tahrir Square have said they will not leave until the president goes, even if they have to leave as dead bodies from Tahrir Square. They have had it with this regime and they are willing to give their all.

So there?s no indication of the protestors? stamina dwindling?

The numbers are dwindling. It is always larger during the day and less at night when it gets cold and people have to be home and are defending their families and neighborhoods.

But the protest is lively. When I talk to people, they tell me the situation on the inside [of Tahrir Square] is safe. Their spirits are high. And the protest continues.

Any predictions on what will happen next?

I don?t know. Mubarak has made concessions. This regime has made concessions, so far, and they will continue to do so as long as there are demonstrators that are creating this kind of spectacle in the media, that are putting themselves at risk for this kind of a cause.

They will not be silenced easily. Not at all.

NCR contributor Claire Schaeffer-Duffy is conducting interviews with people connected to the unrest in Egypt this week. For her previous interviews, see:

- **Egyptian uprising 'far beyond what people expected'** [2], a conversation with Egyptian expert John Esposito
- **In Egypt, most powerful example of 'people power' in history** [3], a conversation with Gene Sharp, a renowned scholar of nonviolent struggle
- **Violence on Cairo streets, Egyptian demonstrators say 'will not be silenced'** [4], a conversation with says Philip Rizk, an Egyptian filmmaker and activist
- **Egyptian protester: 'Since we were born, everything had paused'** [5], a conversation with Moroug Badawy, a 24-year old Egyptian graduate student

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