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After the carrot, Egypt's rulers show the stick

Added At: 2011-02-19 4:31 PM Last Updated At: 2011-02-19 4:31 PM

REUTERS

CAIRO: Egypt's new military rulers, after promising to deliver civilian rule in six months, have warned workers using their new-found freedom to protest about pay and conditions that strikes must stop.

The military council, under pressure from activists to speed up the pace of reform, has adopted a softly-softly approach since taking power after the downfall of Hosni Mubarak, but said late on Friday that labor unrest threatened national security.

Their order came amid exuberant celebrations by millions across Egypt with fireworks, dancing and music to mark a week since Mubarak, 82, was swept aside after 30 years, triggering a cascade of protest throughout the Middle East.

"They (strikes) will be confronted and legal steps will be taken against them to protect the security of the nation and citizens," said the statement on state media, which in effect bans strikes and industrial action.

"It's Not The Time For It," said a banner headline in the state-owned Akhbar Elyom newspaper, urging the nation to end work stoppages which were causing "a state of paralysis to our national economy" and losing Egypt crucial revenue.

Banks, which have been closed this week because of strikes that have disrupted business, are due to open on Sunday, the first day of the working week in Egypt. The military believes this is an important step toward restoring normality.

Workers cite a series of grievances. What unites them is a new sense of being able to speak out in the post-Mubarak era.

Businessmen welcomed the statement [that strikes will be suppressed] but had wanted it sooner.

"I think it is a very late decision. The army should have given a firm statement for all kinds of sit-ins to stop, immediately after Mubarak stepped down," said Sami Mahmoud, a board member of the Nile Company, a food distributor.

"Though this statement should have come way earlier, I think the army was just allowing people to take their chance to voice their demands and enjoy the spirit of freedom," said Walid Abdel-Sattar, a businessman in the power industry.

The message to return to work was reinforced by influential preacher Sheikh Yousef al-Qaradawi at Friday prayers.

"I call on everyone who has stopped working, gone on strike or who is at a sit-in, to support this revolution by working. Be patient," Qaradawi told the faithful.

Life is far from normal in Egypt after the 18-day uprising erupted on January 25, with schools closed, tanks on the streets in major cities and nationwide public sector strikes.

The military statement also said that "some elements" were preventing state employees from working. Others were appropriating state land and building on farm land.

"The Supreme Council for the Armed Forces will not allow the continuation of those illegitimate practices," it said in the strongly-worded statement, without specifying precisely what steps would be taken against the perpetrators.

Protests, sit-ins and strikes have occurred at state-owned institutions across Egypt, including the stock exchange, textile and steel firms, media organizations, the postal service, railways, the Culture Ministry and the Health Ministry.

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In a sign of economic nervousness, Egypt's stock exchange, closed since January 27 because of the turmoil, said it would remain shut until it was sure banks were functioning properly.

The council understood workers' demands and had instructed the relevant state bodies to study and act on them, the military statement said. But citizens had a duty toward the state.

"It was also noted that the continuation of the state of instability and the consequences resulting from it will lead to damage in national security," the statement said.

Pro-democracy campaigners welcomed the army's suspension of the [mock democratic] constitution [that contains provisions discriminating against opposition parties], [the] dissolution of parliament [stacked with hand-picked supporters of Mubarak] and a referendum on constitutional amendments but still **want the immediate release of political prisoners and lifting of emergency laws.**

Uncertainty remains over how much influence the military will exert in reshaping a corrupt and oppressive ruling system which it has propped up for six decades. It has also been unclear how much freedom the army will allow in the transition.

Most Egyptians, however, are keen to get back to normal, begin earning again and restart the damaged economy.

Workers were sweeping up debris on Saturday at Tahrir Square, the center of the protests that toppled Mubarak and the venue of a jubilant all-night party, with the planks of a plinth used by Qaradawi being dismantled.