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Egypt :

Counter-revolution gains in Egypt

- Debate - Problems of the Arab and Middle East regions -

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Egypt's Cairo Court for Urgent Matters on Sept. 23 stamped the "legal" coup de grace on the now fully unmasked face of the U.S.-backed military dictatorship. The court dissolved the Muslim Brotherhood in all respects, confiscated its assets, seized its buildings and banned all MB activities.

Egypt's state newspaper Al Ahram, reporting on the court's decision, stated that the Brotherhood had "violated the rights of its citizens, who found only oppression and arrogance during the MB reign." MB rule, Al Ahram continued, had been ended when "fatigued citizens had risen up this summer under the protection of the armed forces" the sword of the homeland inseparable from their people in the confrontation with an unjust regime."

The court's decision followed three months of brutal terror, which was meticulously organized by the refurbished Mubarak-era reactionary military headed by the July 3 coup leader, General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. This included the arrest or murder of virtually the entire leadership of the MB.

The decimation of the MB became a public spectacle covered by Egyptian state television broadcasts that pictured the military and police as "defenders of the nation" while they slaughtered Muslims in cities across Egypt, including house to house searches, according to the Sept. 20 New York Times. The stated objective was "to flush out Islamic militants" everywhere.

All media, foreign and domestic, not associated with the military state power were banned from observing the carefully orchestrated annihilation of any Egyptians suspected of being MB supporters. The state media took pains to portray the massacres as armed conflicts between the "Islamic terrorists" who supported Morsi and the patriotic and nationalist-minded military and police, who postured as the "people's saviors."

The Egypt-wide purge of Muslims followed the military's July 14 slaughter of some 2000 sit-in protesters in Cairo, 11 days after the July 3 arrest of Egypt's elected President Mohamed Morsi and his immediate associates, ordered by al-Sisi. Under pressure from irritated U.S. officials, who had previously hailed Morsi's election as "the most democratic in Egyptian history," al-Sisi then promised new elections that would include MB participation. But al-Sisi's words quickly gave way to monstrous deeds wherein MB and supporting Muslims were to be killed like "rats." U.S. officials to this day remain silent on the mass purge, other than to advise the murderers to pursue a more moderate approach, including allowing the MB to participate in some far-off election process!

Tamarrud mobilization exaggerated

The July 3 military coup followed on the heels of the June 30 nationwide massive mobilization organized by the Tamarrud (Rebellion) movement, which claimed to have collected between 17 and 22 million signatures on its petition demanding Morsi's resignation and new elections.

In a similar vein, widely reported figures of over 20 million people who mobilized in the streets on June 30 were employed to demonstrate the overwhelming national support for Morsi's resignation. A Reuters account quoted a "military source" as stating that 14 million took part. Were any of these figures accurate, they would have represented the largest mass mobilization "virtually a quarter of Egypt's population" recorded in human history.

Based on a range of sources from left to right in Egypt, Socialist Action and this writer in earlier articles unfortunately reported the above figures as fact. Since then, however, they have proven to be gross exaggerations and a correction is in order. A more accurate account of the size of the June 30 mobilizations can be found in a September article published in the London Review of Books by Hugh Roberts, entitled "The Revolution That Wasn't."

Roberts writes: "The target of 15 million signatories for the petition was clearly chosen because it exceeded the number of Egyptians—13.23 million—who voted for Morsi in the presidential election of June 2012. It was subsequently claimed that at least 14 million marched against him on 30 June. This figure was soon overtaken by others: 17 million, 22 million. The veteran Egyptian feminist Nawal el-Saadawi even claimed that 34 million had been there, a majority of the total electorate.

"These figures were fairy tales, the tallest of tall stories. But the Egyptians who bombarded the world's media with such whoppers can't seriously be faulted for trying it on: the West made itself the gallery; they played to it....

"The numbers question was investigated by Jack Brown, an American writer who has lived in Cairo for several years and who on 11 July published a detailed article in *Maghreb émergent*, an indispensable source of serious coverage of North African developments, republished in English on the website *International Boulevard*. Brown worked out from the actual area of Tahrir Square and the streets leading to it that on the most generous estimate the demonstration can't have exceeded 265,000 people."

Including a related Cairo demonstration on June 30, the author puts the total in the city at perhaps 500,000. Including other protests throughout Egypt, the figure might approach one million, according to Roberts. The British Guardian gave a slightly higher estimate of "up to 500,000" massing in Tahrir Square alone. Still, all these figures are a far cry from the 20-plus million widely reported.

It cannot be denied, however, that the Tamarrud mobilizations were massive and included a majority of working-class and student forces. But while they included in their leadership young activists who had played important roles in the 2011 Tahrir Square mobilizations, they were overwhelmingly driven forward by pro-capitalist parties, not to mention billionaire capitalist funders who had either previously backed the Mubarak regime or participated in the 2011 elections as capitalist opposition parties.

The evidence is also clear that key forces in the military encouraged the protests, more than likely waiting in the wings for the moment to seize the opportunity to transform Tamarrud's demand for new elections into a fait accompli—that is, Morsi's immediate removal.

Indeed, prior to June 30, protesters at the Presidential Palace that housed Morsi were given virtual free reign as the military and police refused Morsi's call for aid. The military and police disappeared! Morsi was compelled to call on his followers in the countryside to defend his residence. Pitched battles, with an estimated one thousand on each side, ensued. Neither the police nor military intervened until hours later, signaling their intention to leave the elected president's fate to the protesters.

It was no accident that many of the leading chants on June 30 were demands that the military remove Morsi, as opposed to the formal Tamarrud demand for Morsi's resignation.

Revolutionary Socialists' mistakes

Tragically, when the military stepped in, some components of the Tamarrud mobilization, including Egypt's tiny

Revolutionary Socialist (RS) group, hailed the coup, claiming that it represented nothing less than the “second Egyptian Revolution.” The RS insisted that the military was compelled to step in to prevent the people from going further and challenging the state power itself! This delusion was accompanied by RS leaders’ calling on the “new authorities” to “bring to trial” Morsi and his regime’s supporters for their crimes against the Egyptian people. The crimes of the 30-year Mubarak dictatorship were not mentioned, as if al-Sisi and his army were new and unconnected entities with no past record.

The July 3 statement by the RS is amazing for its hyperbole, not to mention the fact that the group mistook a counterrevolution for a revolution. The RS wrote: “An unprecedented revolutionary situation has developed over the demand that the failed president and his group leave power. Practical steps towards taking power are being taken, by shutting down provincial governors’ offices, and expelling the governors who are affiliated to the Brotherhood in many provinces, confirming the principle of direct democracy in governorate elections. In order to achieve this we call on the workers and the masses to form their popular committees in the workplaces and neighbourhoods.

“The speech by the Minister of Defence [General al-Sisi!] raised more questions than it answered, with its vague wording and expressions open to varying interpretations. It gave government and opposition 48 hours to agree to a way out of the crisis but raised fears of deals and compromises, such as the temporary handover of power to the president of the Shura Council (Morsi’s brother-in-law).

“The failed regime is still resisting, and this is unacceptable to the masses of 30 June, who have rejected the Brotherhood’s rule. And although the Minister of Defence’s statement began by stressing non-interference in politics, it ended by indicating his participation in the drawing up [of] a road-map for the transitional period, building it into the political process.”

We need not further recount the bloody aftermath of the July 3 coup. It was only weeks later that the Revolutionary Socialists, who a year earlier had campaigned for the capitalist Morsi’s presidency, calling him the “right wing of the Egyptian Revolution,” finally saw the forest for the trees and denounced al-Sisi’s slaughter of MB supporters, while making sure to also condemn the crippled and beheaded MB, whose entire leadership had been jailed or murdered.

Revolutionary leadership required

The Sept. 23 “legal” banning of the MB and the preceding months of massive murder and repression of its ranks, as well as the persecution of regime opponents more generally, represents a tragic turn in the promising April 25, 2011, Arab Spring mobilizations that forced a reluctant Egyptian military, closely advised by its U.S. imperial backers, to remove 30-year dictator Hosni Mubarak.

While Egypt’s Arab Spring galvanized mass forces to express the deeply felt anger and hatred at the horrific conditions that the regime had imposed in the course of driving through its neoliberal programs, the central institutions of capitalist power remained virtually untouched.

The momentarily masked “democratically-minded” generals who replaced Mubarak had every intention of stacking the ballot boxes to achieve an electoral result that would rubber stamp their political, economic, and military rule. The generals who conducted the elections violated an Egyptian law that prohibited soldiers from voting, thus allowing 700,000 soldiers and military personnel to add their votes to the military regime candidate’s total—though still an insufficient number to prevent a Morsi runoff victory.

The same military then declared the election to the upper house of the Egyptian parliament illegal and abolished the body entirely.

Mohammed Morsi, whose MB had for decades made its peace with the Mubarak dictatorship and who was a latecomer to the Tahrir Square mobilizations, emerged as the unexpected victor. But as a capitalist politician, Morsi was incapable of challenging any aspect of the economic and social system that he had supported for a lifetime. His regime was destined for defeat from day one; it was only a matter of time until the proper pretext was employed to formally restore the real power behind Egypt's economy and military.

Whatever modest reforms Morsi might have contemplated, his government's myriad ties to Egyptian capitalism and to world capitalist institutions like the IMF and the World Bank, made them impossible. In fact, his most important measures were directed against Egyptian workers and farmers.

Egypt's 2011 revolution demanded justice, freedom, and equality but lacked a single working-class institution or deeply rooted revolutionary party to achieve these objectives. The Egyptian capitalist state power remains essentially unchallenged and intact, with no organized mass force on the scene to codify or realize even the most minimal democratic demands.

This is not to say that the Tahrir mobilizations did not open the door wide to important working-class and community organization. New unions have been formed across the country, and protests of all kinds, until the recent crackdown, were the norm. But none of these organizations has been consolidated, and few, if any, have developed into independent formations free from government or bureaucratic control. All of Egypt's trade unions, and especially the new and barely coherent independent trade-union federation, backed the al-Sisi coup and supported this new dictator's call for a national mobilization to provide the military with a "mandate" to crush the MB.

The impressive June 30 Tamarrud mobilizations proved to be easy prey, if not the conscious product of a military-engineered tactic to remove Morsi and put Mubarak's regime, minus Mubarak, back in the "official" driver's seat of state power.

The future of the Egyptian revolution lies in the capacity of conscious revolutionary fighters to build a mass revolutionary socialist party of the working masses and oppressed. This will inevitably include new independent formations where workers begin to exercise real power, with a leadership intent on challenging capitalist rule itself.

There will be no "democratic revolution" in Egypt separate and apart from the socialist transformation of society. The absence in Egypt today of even a semblance of socialist groups that have significant roots among the masses weighs heavily on the now indisputable need to transform the angry anti-capitalist sentiments that have motivated millions to fight back into a force capable of storming the heavens and ending capitalist rule.

The lessons of today's setback for the revolutionary process must be carefully evaluated by serious fighters as they prepare for the future.

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