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Book Reviews

Why the revolt in Egypt?

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Egypt: The Moment of Change. Edited by Rabab El-Mahdi and Philip Marfleet Zed Press, 2009, U.S. distributor Macmillan, 224 pages, \$28.95 paperback, reviewed by Dan La Botz

Why has the Arab world suddenly erupted in revolution from Tunisia to Egypt, from Bahrain to Yemen? Above all, why Egypt, the largest and most important of the Arab nations?

Popular accounts on television and in the press focus on social media, on Facebook and Twitter. Others, especially Al Jazeera's chiefs, not surprisingly, give a lot of credit to Al Jazeera. The central issue, we are told by almost everyone, is the desire for political democracy. The principal actors: the young professionals.

While there is some truth in this view, the roots of the Egyptian revolution lie deeper in its history, in its society, and in the experience and struggles of its working people. Rabab El-Mahdi and Philip Marfleet, the editors of *Egypt: The Moment of Change*, put together a collection of eight essays by as many experts that offers a compelling explanation for the revolution that suddenly drove President Husni Mubarak from power and continues to challenge the new military government.

Written a year before the fact, their book virtually predicts the coming upheaval which is now history. The pithy introduction alone provides by far the best short account of pre-revolutionary Egypt, of Egypt in a pre-revolutionary period.

Anwar Sadat and Mubarak, they explain, transformed Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalist state socialism into a model of neoliberalism in the Arab world. Most Egyptians saw their standard of living decline, and more than 20% became poor, living on two dollars a day or less. Many Egyptians "two out of twenty million" migrated to seek work in the Arab oil states.

A small minority of Egyptians grew richer, much richer. They backed Mubarak who, operating under the 1981 State of Emergency Law, suppressed dissent and opposition through intimidation, arrest, and torture. Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP) won all elections through fraud and coercion.

The opposition, divided between religious and secular and among rival political parties, found it hard to unite against its government. Then beginning in the first years of the 21st century, things began to change.

Political Economy of Mubarak's Egypt

Ahmad El-Sayed El-Naggar describes the underlying political economy of the Mubarak years in his chapter "Economic policy: from state control to decay and corruption." The Egyptian revolution of 1952 under the Free Officers movement, followed by Nasser's election to the presidency in 1956, created a state capitalist system.

El-Naggar argues that nonetheless there emerged "a capitalist class loyal to the bureaucratic ruling class," but without much entrepreneurial spirit. With the onset of neoliberalism, former state bureaucrats sought out relations with more aggressive capitalists and created a new political economy based on "crony capitalism."

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While this economic system was anything but spectacularly successful, the practices of cronyism and corruption enriched the new financial, industrial and commercial elite. Mubarak and this stratum of the wealthiest Egyptians succeeded in transferring the tax burden to the middle class and working people. At the same time they used their economic and political power to take over state industries and land belonging to peasant communities. And the door was thrown open to foreign investors. For Egyptian farmers and workers the system would be a disaster.

Ray Bush in the chapter titled "The land and the people" explains how Sadat's and Mubarak's new order transformed the Egyptian countryside. In Egypt, 30% of the workforce toils in agriculture. Sadat and Mubarak reversed Nasser's modest agrarian reform laws of 1952 and 1961, which had redistributed about 14% of the land to about 10% of Egyptian farmers.

Under both state capitalism and neoliberalism, Egypt's agriculture could not keep up with its rising population, and the country became a food importer, relying on imports for 40% of its food needs.

Under the neoliberal regime's "de-sequestration" laws, land was taken back from poor farmers and returned to the old landlords or given to new ones, sometimes foreign capitalists. Massive irrigation projects threatened not only farms but also the environment.

Farmers lost land rights and saw their rents soar, while the media attacked them as lazy. Farmers fought back through militant protest, but faced with secret police spying and violent repression, it proved hard to organize a coordinated resistance.

The Workers under Mubarak

"Workers' struggles under 'socialism' and neoliberalism" are discussed in a chapter with that title written by Joel Beinin. Nasser's "socialist" Egypt had from the beginning suppressed and subordinated the workers' movement. The Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) founded in 1957 was controlled by the state and remained so under Sadat and Mubarak.

Since 1954, despite a 1987 law granting the right to strike, there have been no legal strikes in Egypt. Union elections excluded opponents from the Muslim Brotherhood, the Communist Party, and any other organizations considered disloyal to the state. The national unions never had direct elections for their executive committees.

Despite the state's strict control of the official labor unions, workers rebelled repeatedly against the politics and impacts of both state capitalism and neoliberalism. Strike waves in 1971-72, food riots in 1977, strikes again from 1984 to 1989, and most recently from 2004 to 2009 sometimes won concessions but always faced repression.

Taking the lead in the strikes were men and women employed in industry, particularly the textile industry centered in Mahalla al-Kubra, but groups as diverse as teachers and tax collectors also organized and sometimes struck. Strikes became increasingly political as workers demanded the right to independent labor unions and by the 1980s opposed the dictatorial regime of Mubarak.

Workers could be said to have led the right for democracy in Egypt in the 2000s, though democracy also meant a fight for economic justice.

The Democracy Movement

Paralleling the workers' movement of the 2000s was the broader democracy movement discussed by Rabab El-Mahdi in the chapter "The democracy movement: cycles of protest." Since the founding of the modern Egyptian state by the Free Officers in 1952 there has been one political party using various names but finally called the National Democratic Party (NDP). From 1976 to the elections of 2005, the NDP held a comfortable majority in the parliament.

While there had always been religious and secular opposition and politics right, center and left, state repression and political manipulation kept the opposition in check. (The role of torture in suppressing the opposition is discussed in Aida Seif El-Dawla's chapter "Torture: a state policy.")

Mubarak's foreign policy "Euros" discussed in Anne Alexander's chapter "Mubarak in the international arena" "Euros" that is, his alliance with the United States and Israel, led to internal problems beginning with the second Palestinian intifada.

The second intifada led to massive street demonstrations in the Arab world, including in Egypt, opening up a new political era. The Popular Committee for Support for the Intifada brought together for the first time an alliance of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Nasserites, and Socialists. This experience in turn led to the creation of campaign groups for change in Egypt.

Old and New Oppositions

The Muslim Brotherhood, the largest organization of the political opposition, cannot simply be dismissed as a right-wing, petty bourgeois movement, argues Sameh Naguib in the chapter "Islam(s) old and new." Founded in 1928, by the 1940s the fiercely anti-Communist Muslim Brotherhood had become the largest political movement in Egypt.

During the Nasser period, the Brotherhood (officially outlawed in 1954) withered until by the 1970s it was little more than a remnant. During the Sadat and Mubarak years two different currents developed, one anti-Semitic, anti-Communist and anti-secular and financed by new bourgeois elements, the other Islamist students who gradually became radicalized under the impact of Egyptian foreign policy.

By the late 1970s the new radical student movement had split. One group evolved into the confrontational jihadi groups who assassinated Sadat in 1981 and were destroyed during the 1980s and 1990s by the Egyptian police through imprisonment, torture and execution. The other group, argues Naguib, became a mass populist, multi-class party whose political platform and practice are rife with contradictions.

Today the Muslim Brotherhood espouses political democracy and equal citizenship rights for men and women, Muslims and Christians, but at the same time says no woman or Christian can become the president of Egypt.

Returning to El-Mahdi's discussion of the democracy movement, by the mid-2000s a new democracy movement had emerged with organizations such as the Popular Campaign for Change (known as "Freedom Now"), Kafiya ("Enough"), Women for Democracy ("The Street is Ours"), Youth for Change, Journalists for Change, Artists for Change and Workers for Change.

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With hundreds of members and operating with peaceful guerrilla tactics coordinated by cell phones, computers and social media, this new movement began to organize quickie demonstrations in neighborhoods throughout Cairo.

One of the most interesting developments was the ability of left activists in groups such as the Revolutionary Socialist Organization to form alliances with the Muslim Brotherhood. And now the democracy movement and the workers' movements are in direct communication and coordination. We can only wonder, where will such alliances go now?

During the period from 2005 to 2010 the democracy movement and the workers' movement acted in parallel but without direct connections. Still, their demonstrations and strikes influenced each other and in 2010 exploded in the revolutionary movement which we are now witnessing.

After reading this book, which explains the long, slow buildup to the Egyptian Revolution of 2010, it is clear that forces have been unleashed which will continue to fight not only for democracy but also for workers' demands for economic justice. We will have to wait to see if this becomes a struggle not only for democracy but also for socialism.

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