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Egypt

Egypt's Unfinished Revolution

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Against the Current: We're speaking during the first round of the parliamentary elections in Egypt. How do you assess the information so far about the large turnout and early results?

Atef Said: Before discussing the election, I would like to remind the readers of *Against the Current* what happened in the Egyptian revolution in January/February 2011. After the mass revolt that started on January 25, Egyptians succeeded in ousting Hosni Mubarak, the 30-year ruling dictator. Before leaving office he transferred authority to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF).

In March, Egyptians voted for an interim constitution stipulating that SCAF will transfer power back to civilian government (a parliament and then a democratically elected president). The fact that SCAF is running the transition is the main dilemma of the Egyptian revolution and its future. It is a problem that the revolution did not choose its leaders and did not end by taking power.

Since February 11, SCAF has proven to be working against the revolution. An Egyptian critic described the current situation as a half coup d'état and half revolution. It is half coup d'état in the sense that the military is showing that it wants to control the future of Egypt, and to limit this beautiful and powerful revolution into a superficial change, one controlled by a military regime. And it is half a revolution, in the sense that no significant social and economic changes have occurred for the benefit of the majority of Egyptian people.

In February, some liberal writers in the United States said that it was the U.S. administration and the leaders of Egyptian army who "saved" this revolution. On the contrary, many activists in Egypt expressed concern about how close the army leaders are to the United States. They saw SCAF running the transition as the perfect means to block the radicalization of the revolution in its final days (after the working class had joined) and protecting the interests of businesses and ruling elites as well as U.S. interests in the region.

Now to talk about the election. There are several key points. First, the turnout in this round (the first of three) was at least 60-70%, and even 100% in some areas. That shows how fed up people were with the staged "elections" under Mubarak. Second, the irony is that the leaders of the military interpreted this turnout as showing confidence in themselves. But most activists see it differently – the people want to get rid of the army as soon as possible.

Third, there's the vote for the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafist Islamists. The Brotherhood is pragmatic, very political, almost opportunist. The Salafists are the extremists – not terrorists, but mostly young people who can do violent things. Their strength is very scary for secular forces, liberals, women and religious minorities. The Salafists won some seats in the first round, certainly not as many as the Brotherhood, which got up to 40 percent of the vote.

It should be noted that secular votes were divided among many forces. The liberals are mainly to be blamed because they included in their coalitions some corrupt members from Mubarak's ruling party. Of course, socialists and revolutionary independent activists refused to join such a combination. Hence, secular votes were divided.

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The elected parliament is supposed to be responsible for drafting the new Egyptian constitution – procedurally, they are to choose the drafting committee. That’s why people were really eager to vote.

My view is that whoever is elected is better than the army, which has proven to be the leading force of the counterrevolution, working with the support of Saudi Arabia and the United States. Their purpose was to crush – not simply slow – the reform process. So I say that any elected body is better than SCAF staying in power.

According to the current interim constitution, the writing process for the new constitution is mainly the responsibility of parliament – the General Assembly that will write the constitution is to be chosen by the parliament and Senate [an “upper house” to be elected following the current vote – ed.]. But the army is trying to impose its conditions.

Instead of the original plan for the constitution to be written under an elected parliament and president, the army is pushing for the constitution to be written before the election of the president – the trick being that the constitution would be written while the army still holds executive power.

In the last few months during the wave of protests, the army proposed what they described as “extra-constitutional principles” where they pretend to act as a neutral body to protect society. In fact these would guarantee the separation of the army budget from the state, with special rights for the army to “supervise” the writing of the constitution and any laws affecting the military.

This move is completely tied to the U.S. empire and the yearly \$1.3 billion in military aid it provides. Since the army controls 40% of the Egyptian economy, it would create a military state-above-the-state.

SCAF also is closely tied with the U.S. military-industrial complex. Now, activists in Egypt are worried not only that SCAF and U.S. government may be working together to control the change in Egypt, but that the Muslim Brotherhood may make a deal with SCAF to create a superficial stability, thus protecting the interests of the elites and the United States.

A few days ago, Senator John Kerry visited the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood in their headquarters. They assured him that they will not call for any changes to Mubarak’s economic policies or the Peace Accord with Israel. It is ironic that while the American media continued to fuel the fear about the rise of Islamists in Egypt, the U.S. government did not stop talking with the Muslim Brotherhood. Both the United States and the Brotherhood seem to be in agreement with SCAF about not touching free market policies.

ATC: Can you discuss how this political tug-of-war and the electoral turnout will impact the protest movement in Tahrir and throughout Egypt? Will the protests lose momentum?

AS: Many are worried, and so am I, that people are exhausted. What the military’s done is taken straight out of the manuals of counterrevolution from the empire and dictators – to attack, arrest and kidnap people.

No fewer than 15,000 prisoners are now held in military jails, many of whom are leading activists and bloggers from the February revolution. There are two main events that really proved the army is committed to preserving the Mubarak order – really their own interests too.

One event, in October, was the attack on the peaceful march of the Coptic population. There had been at least four or five incidents of destruction of Coptic churches by the Salafists, right under the eyes of the army – creating an atmosphere of chaos.

These attacks, abetted by hundreds of millions of Saudi dollars, are part of the plan to keep everybody scared. Then, in a Coptic protest march on October 7, more than 25 people were killed and 800 injured.

The second big incident occurred late November in Tahrir, when snipers from the police and security forces shot people in the eyes, and 2000 were injured by the use of toxic teargas, as verified by doctors and human rights observers. This is CS gas that is banned by the U.S. military and by international law for use against civilian protests.

The Egyptian army is now responsible for killing on the same scale as the Syrians, but it's done in the guise of police and blamed on "some bad soldiers." [\[1\]](#)

These events show how committed the military is to crushing the reform movement. Many people said let's give the army a chance, they just want to go slow because they aren't experienced "but with this brutal crackdown on activists, the army's intent is clear.

ATC: The workers' movement emerged strongly during the anti-dictator struggle. Has it continued to develop?

AS: In the last days of Mubarak, as I mentioned earlier, the workers' movement became really crucial in the mobilizations, even if this wasn't reported in the mainstream media. There were many important strikes including public transport, public sector steel workers, and the textile workers in Mahalla too. These were decisive in scaring the United States and the army into sacrificing Mubarak. This is central to any left analysis.

After the revolution the first thing the army did, on the one hand, was issuing a decree to support free trade unions forming outside the state-controlled structure. But workers really won this freedom through their own actions, moving the struggle beyond Tahrir, in a social direction.

On the other hand, this declaration was combined with a military law to ban strikes. Many work places were attacked, even with tanks, but strikes resumed after being frozen for a couple of months.

Workers won a Supreme Court ruling for a minimum monthly salary of 1200 Egyptian pounds, around \$250, but this hasn't been implemented. Some people only make \$30-50 bucks a month, if you can believe it. And the army has continued to attack strikes.

There are now more than 15 unions outside the official structure. Some of them are very important "particularly teachers, tax collectors, shipping and airport workers, and public transportation" and have established a Federation for Independent Trade Unions in Egypt. They have been very active in the protests in Tahrir. [\[2\]](#)

Some activists express some concern that the new independent unions are not militant enough or strong enough to contribute to the continuation of the revolution. This may be somewhat accurate. But the story of the birth of these unions is worth learning from. Nothing happens in one night.

Workers and the poor are still waiting for an outcome of justice from the revolution. In many cases, they continue to strike despite military courts and the emergency law. But the ruling elites and SCAF are still insisting on attacking workers and their unions. This cannot continue. Otherwise, workers will be back on the streets.

ATC: If we can come back to the elections, we know there were forces in the protest movement that wanted a

boycott. How do you assess this question?

AS: This is a very important question. After the crackdown and the murders by the military in Tahrir, some youth and revolutionary factions were so angry that they said we had to boycott the election because it would give legitimacy to the real enemy, the real leadership of the counterrevolution, the leaders of the army. The Revolutionary Socialists for example called for a boycott. [3]

But others said a boycott would be meaningful only if everybody boycotted. The army leadership also played a trick, and refused to ban the old NDP (Mubarak's National Democratic Party) figures from running in the election. Those people will be loyal to the army to preserve their own corrupt interests. So most of the unions and the left encouraged a vote, although a section of the radical left, ultraleft I would say, called for a boycott.

ATC: My sense in general is that the attraction of voting is very powerful after a dictatorship, even when the elections are flawed and manipulated as you're describing here.

AS: Yes, and this was shown by people standing in long lines, including women, everyone.

ATC: What's the prognosis going forward now?

AS: People are thinking about this every day. The army appears to be cracking down, attempting to divide and polarize society between secular and religious, tolerating the scary religious extremists and the attacks on Coptic churches, all to break the unity that was crucial to ousting Mubarak.

As a lawyer, I know for sure they are taking things out of their old Mubarak manuals. There's a new law for lawyers and judges "there are more than half a million lawyers in Egypt" to create divisions between them. The military hold power, and the United States and Saudi Arabia love the military leadership.

But the activists and the youth are now very angry, because between us and the military there is now a line of blood. And with the new parliament taking office in January, there will be some conflicts between the army and the Muslim Brotherhood. Military leaders will try to prevent the parliament from naming a prime minister and forming a genuine government. The parliament will fight for its power to act.

There is a horrible possible scenario that the Muslim Brotherhood will cave in to the military in exchange for some favors. But the Brotherhood is not as corrupt as the religious leaders have become, for example, in Pakistan. People are worried about going to a Pakistan model, where the Brotherhood would give the army the presidency. We know the army is in communication with them "but things are not so gloomy.

The army continues to produce division and chaos. People are worried. There are a hundred thousand thugs and ex-convicts who worked for Mubarak, and now the army is colluding with them.

But workers are now on the scene. People are angry about poverty and attacks on workers. Those who participated in the revolution in order to win economic justice have seen no gains. [4]

ATC: What should we be doing here in support of the struggle in Egypt?

AS: Call the State Department, call the White House, carry signs in the Occupy demonstrations supporting the

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democratic struggle in Egypt. When I say call officials, I do not by any means believe that they can create change or are interested in change. But it is important to pressure them and expose the official politics that are really against democracy in Egypt.

Under the old constitution, the power could have been transferred (from Mubarak) to the Chief Justice. They violated their own constitution when they transferred power to the SCAF.

I want to note that much of that \$1.3 billion in military aid Egypt receives every year isn't even for the army – it's for high-level corrupt deals that we know nothing about, hidden from any oversight, including the import of the U.S.-manufactured toxic gas.

U.S. activists need to create awareness campaigns about the role of U.S. foreign policy, especially the Middle East and in the context of the Arab Spring. By comparing the different stances of the U.S. administration in the different Arab countries, it's easy to conclude that support for democratic change doesn't drive U.S. foreign policies, particularly in this region.

We are hoping our struggle has not been betrayed. Nonetheless I want to end on an optimistic note. There is an Occupy the Cabinet taking place in Egypt now. The Cabinet (government) headquarters is located two minutes distance from Tahrir Square and from Mohamed Mahmoud Street, where many activists were killed.

Since November 20, despite the large number of activists killed and injured, protesters still occupy the street in front of the Cabinet. The new (military-appointed) prime minister has not been able to reach the Cabinet building. [This interview was completed before the military and police assaults on protesters during the December 16-18 weekend. – ed.]

The area is decorated with banners and stands as a symbol of resistance against the army. The only way to enter is on a top of a tank and kill us.

January/February 2012, ATC 156 <http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/3493>

[1] For Atef Said's detailed report published by Amnesty International, see <http://www.amnestyusa.org/news/news...> – ed.

[2] See also <http://menasolidaritynetwork.com/20...> – ed.

[3] A statement by the Revolutionary Socialists following the violence in Tahrir, "Down with military rule," is posted on the Solidarity website at <http://www.solidarity-us.org/curren...> – ed.

[4] See <http://www.theworld.org/2011/12/egy...>