

Interview

Egypt: “It is the beginning of a long struggle”

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Interview with Samir Amin, 02-09-11, at World Social Forum, Dakar, Senegal.

Samir Amin (SA): In the short paper [[1](#)], I wanted to stress the strategy of the enemy, that is, the strategy of the USA and the ruling class of Egypt. Many people do not understand this. Now I would like to discuss the components and the strategies of the movement.

There are four components of the opposition. One is the youth. They are politicized young people, they are organized very strongly, they are more than one million organized, which is not at all a small number. They are against the social and economic system. Whether they are anti-capitalist is a little theoretical for them, but they are against social injustice and growing inequality. They are nationalist in the good sense, they are anti-imperialist. They hate the submission of Egypt to the US hegemony. They are therefore against so-called peace with Israel, which tolerates Israel's continued colonization of occupied Palestine. They are democratic, totally against the dictatorship of the army and the police. They have decentralized leaderships. When they gave the order to demonstrate, the mobilization was one million. But within a few hours, the actual figure was not one million, but fifteen millions, everywhere throughout the whole nation, and in the quarters of small towns and villages. They had an immediate gigantic positive echo in the whole nation.

The second component is the radical left, which comes from the communist tradition. The young are not anti communist, but they do not want to be put in the frame of a party with chiefs and orders. They do not have bad relations with the communists. Absolutely no problem. Thanks to the demonstrations, there is a coming together, not of leadership, but of interaction.

The third component is the middle class democrats. The system is so police and so mafia that many, including small businessmen, were continuously racketed in order to survive. They are not part of the left; they accept capitalism, business and the market, they are even not totally anti-American, they do not love Israel but they accept it. But they are democrats, against the concentration of power of the army, police and the gang mafia around. El Baradei is typical of them, he has no idea of the economy other than what it is — the market. He does not know what socialism is, but he is democrat.

The fourth component is the Muslim Brotherhood. Even if they have a public political popular echo, they are ultra reactionary. They have not only religious ideology, they are reactionaries on social ground. They have been openly against the strikes of the workers, standing with the state. They think workers should accept the market. They took a position against the peasants' movement .

There is a strong middle peasant movement, they are menaced by the market, by the rich peasant, they struggle for the right to maintain their property. Muslim Brotherhood took position against them, saying that land property is a private right, and market is sacrosanct in Koran. Muslim Brotherhood has been in fact complicit with the regime. The regime and Muslim Brotherhood are in apparent conflict, but in fact they are combined. The State has given up to Muslim Brotherhood three major institutions: education, justice, and state TV; these are very important state institutions. Through education, they have imposed the veil first for the girls in school and then for society. Through justice, they introduced the Islam law shari'a. Through the media, they influence public opinion. The leadership has always been a corrupted political leadership made of very rich people. They have always been financed by Saudi Arabia, which means by the USA. But they have two big influences, one in the sectors of the middle class which are pro capitalist, anti-communist, afraid of the people, and they think Muslim rule is not a bad thing. These are spontaneously with them. They are very influential among teachers, medical doctors, and lawyers etc. At the same time, they have a lumpen support in which they recruit their paid militias. In Egypt, extreme poverty is large scale. We have 5 million in Cairo that can be totally deprived among a population of 15 million. Among the very poor with very low political understanding, Muslim Brotherhood has this army that they can mobilize.

What happens is the following. The movement was started by the youth, joined immediately by the radical left, and joined the next day by the bourgeois democrats. Muslim Brotherhood boycotted for the first four days because they thought the movement would be defeated by the police. When they saw that the movement could not be defeated, the leadership thought they could not stay out, and they moved in. This fact must be known.

We come to the strategy of the USA. The system is not Mubarak, but the people started with one symbol, which is Mubarak. A few hours after Mubarak nominated Omar Suleiman as vice president, the slogan shouted by the people was "No Mubarak, no Suleiman, they are two Americans." Obama said we want a soft transition, which would be something like in the Philippines. The people say, we want to get rid of not one criminal but all criminals, a real transition not a farce, so there is a very high political consciousness. Yet the USA target is a soft transition. How? By opening negotiation with the right and the centre, with Muslim Brotherhood and eventually some bourgeois democrats, they would isolate the left and the youth. That is their strategy. With or without formal concessions, they say soon Mubarak will be out. An invitation to so called "negotiation" was initiated by vice president Soliman. The Muslim Brotherhood leadership is clever, they did not surrender. But they accepted the principle of negotiations with the system.

The conference of the movement, which is discussing everyday, is establishing the rules for a real transition:

First, the immediate dissolution of the fabricated assembly

Second, the immediate lifting of the martial law and allowing free demonstration;

Third, starting the project of a new constitution;

Fourth, the assembly elected should be a constitutional assembly;

Fifth, not immediate or fast elections, but allow for a long time of freedom. If it is immediate elections, many people will vote for the Muslims because they are organized, they have the media, and so on. But if you allow for a year of real freedom, the left and the youth can then organize themselves.

It is the beginning of a long struggle. Egypt is a country of long revolutions. From 1920 to 1952, with ups and downs. In the long run, the youth and the left are the majority, with capacity of action. But a bad possible scenario is the possibility of Muslim Brotherhood attacking them. They have tried. The system is very vicious. It had opened the prison and released 17,000 criminals, given them pro-Mubarak badges, arms, money, and the guarantee that they would not return to the prison, for them to attack the demonstrators. These criminals could not have escaped from the prison if not with the protection of the police. Nobody from the movement opened the prison.

Wang Hui (WH): You think the young people are for the left. But it seems likely that the right and Muslim Brotherhood will try to divide the young people. I think it is important that the youth, even the democrats, are not for the Americans.

SA: Many democrats are neutral, not against the Americans. El Baradei is rather naïve that the Americans are for democracy. We continue repeating that the target of USA is not democracy.

Lau Kin Chi (LKC): What has been the role of the workers and the farmers?

SA: Three years ago, there was a wave of strikes in Egypt, the strongest in the African continent, South Africa included, since 50 years. The official trade unions are completely controlled by the state, since the time of Nasser, like the Soviet model of state control of the trade union. The strike did not start from the trade union leadership, but from the bottom. We can say it was spontaneous in terms of it not being initiated by the leadership. It was a success, a gigantic success. The regime three years ago wanted to send the police. The companies said no, it was impossible, because we could have all the factories destroyed. They negotiated. The strikes won very small concessions, 10% or 15% increase of wages, which was less than what had been eaten by the inflation of those years. However it won something important for dignity, and for trade union rights, such as no one would be dismissed without the knowledge of the trade union. They established themselves as new independent trade union. They are there now in the movement.

The peasant movement is much more difficult in connecting. There has always been a radical movement since 1920. You have the latifundias, but there are also the rich peasants which are very strong in rural society since they are not the absentees, and they have relations with the government, the lawyers, the doctors. There are the middle peasants, the poor and the very poor peasants, and the landless. The situation of the landless, curiously, has not deteriorated in the last 30 years, because they have out migrated to the Gulf countries for work, and they have made some small money which allowed them not to buy back land, but to establish themselves in the grey, informal economic activities. The very poor are menaced, because the neo liberal market allows and facilitates them to be expropriated by the rich peasants, new capitalist landowners, and modern Egyptian companies associated with agrobusiness. They are very radical, they are not anti-communist, but they do not know what communism is. They simply do not know. It is the weakness of the communists that they have never been able to integrate them. The only people who went to discuss with them were the communists, not Muslims, not bourgeois democrats. But nobody has influence on them. But they have continued their struggles.

LKC: Have the workers and the peasants participated in the recent mobilizations?

SA: The peasants have mobilized in the small villages, but there are no links with the global movement. They do not participate in the conference that is discussing the transition.

WH: Are the movements mostly urban?

SA: Yes, also in small towns.

WH: How would you explain their spontaneity?

SA: The people are fed up with everything, with the police. If you happen to be arrested, even if it is only because of the red light, you will be beaten and tortured. There is the daily torture and repression from the police. Absolute impunity. Most ugly. People are also fed up with the mafia system. The entrepreneurs that the World Bank says are the future, are gangsters. Where do they have their fortune? From selling land of the state given to them by the state for nothing, for building projects; wealth accumulated by dispossession. They are squeezing the real entrepreneurs.

People are also fed up with the American dictates. Egyptians are good nationalists. We ask, how can we be so low, that the American ambassador and president dictate everything everyday? There is also the social degradation. Unemployment and poverty is growing for the majority, inequality is gigantic. So all that combined. The government has no legitimacy. Now that is no more. Sudden explosions. People got killed. But they know that if you struggle, you may die.

WH: What is the impact on solidarity on Arab countries?

SA: It will have an echo, but each country is different. Tunisia is a small country, with a higher level of education and of living, but it is a small country and vulnerable in the global economy.

WH: It seems people are more organized in Tunisia, and it is more spontaneous in Egypt. There would certainly be an impact on Palestine?

SA: Sure, also impact on Syria which is very complex. It is very difficult to know the impact on Iraq. South Yemen is nationalist populist left and with Marxist rhetoric and some thinking of the radical left, the strong feeling for one nation. But it is like Korea, with a backward north and an advanced south. Yemen may split again, because the south cannot accept unity.

Phone interview with Samir Amin

LKC: Please comment on the latest developments.

SA: What has happened is that firstly, Mubarak has not resigned. He has been dismissed by a coup d'état of the head of the army, and he and his fellow vice president Omar Suleiman have been dismissed. This new official leadership of the army is claiming that it will hold power until new elections, and then the army will go back to the barracks. In the meantime, they are responsible for the transition.

But the conference of the movements has continued its work, to push for its demands for a new democracy with all freedoms such as organization and access to the media.

Secondly, this conference will deliberate on a concept of new constitution, so that the assembly that will be elected will be a constitutional assembly, not a legislative assembly, even if the government makes its soft amendments to the present constitution.

It is too early to know how this new government will manage the condition. We will know in the coming days. The movement has not completed its project. The leadership of the army wants a strong transition with an election in which of course the Muslim Brotherhood will be highly represented. We want a slow transition in order to allow for the new political, democratic forces to organize themselves, to elaborate their programmes and projects, and to have access to the public opinion, before the elections.

Footnotes

[1] See [The Movement in Egypt](#)