

Egypt : Protesting Injustice and Difficult Prospects

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“WE DO NOT like prisons, but they do not scare us,” says Mahienour al-Masry, Egyptian lawyer and human rights activist who was serving a three year prison sentence for violating anti-protest laws before her recent release.

In the latest of numerous campaigns seeking justice within the Egyptian judiciary system, more than sixty of Egypt's political prisoners began hunger strikes in August. Tens of other activists and public intellectuals are also partaking of the strikes in solidarity with the prisoners as part of the campaign that has been dubbed “gibna akhirna” or “we have reached the end of our rope.”

The precarious and therefore particularly courageous nature of this wave of hunger strikes is easy to see in light of the case of Mohamed Soltan, a 26-year-old United States citizen of Egyptian descent, who was arrested in the wake of the massacre of the Rabaa sit-in of August 2013.

Soltan has been on a hunger strike since January 26th in protest of his continual detention and maltreatment. His decision to strike was taken after his first court date which itself came after a four-month period of detention without charges stretching from August 2013 to January 2014. His family reports that he was severely abused during this period.

In January Soltan was charged, together with 50 other defendants including senior members of the Muslim Brotherhood, with spreading false information and funding the Rabaa sit-in. To this date, these charges have not been proven and no verdict has been issued. Several court dates have been set, only for the judge to postpone the trial.

Soltan, who graduated from Ohio State University in 2010, has made appeals to the U.S. government to intervene on his behalf, and similar appeals have been made by his supporters in a few American cities.

There has been no response from the American or Egyptian governments, in spite of several medical reports that have confirmed Soltan's deteriorating health and imminent danger to his life. As of October 11, he is in critical condition and the trial adjourned until the 15th.

While Soltan's case is made urgent by his worsening medical condition, it is certainly not exceptional. According to some counts, the number of political prisoners in Egypt exceeds 41,000, the majority of whom are either in detention awaiting trials or have been sentenced in cursory trials that barely maintain a semblance of justice. Detainees and their families report horrific conditions of filthy overcrowded prisons and abusive treatment.

Drive to Silence Dissent

Although most of those arrested immediately in the wake of president Morsi's ouster by the military in July 2013 were charged with belonging to the recently outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, the government of president al-Sisi has since moved swiftly towards the incarceration of a wider spectrum of dissenters including Islamists and secularists alike.

The arrests, detentions and inhumane treatment of political detainees have been part of a larger state policy to silence all forms of dissent and to corral public opinion behind al-Sisi, the Egyptian army, and the police. It is now quite obvious that while members of the Muslim Brotherhood and supporters of ousted President Morsi continue to bear the brunt of state repression, what started as mass arrests and murder of Islamists has become a more inclusive and wider-scoped totalitarian strategy.

A hastily formed committee charged with amending the constitution ratified an anti-protest law that criminalizes virtually all forms of street protests, including the most non-violent. In December, the same month the Muslim Brotherhood was branded a terrorist organization, senior members of the secular democratic April 6 movement, Ahmad Maher and Mohamed Adel, were arrested with Alaa Abd al-Fattah and 22 others with charges of violating this law. Four months later, the April 6 movement was outlawed and its activities banned altogether.

Harassment of all civil liberties organizations such as the ECESR (Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights) has become routine. Even the most minor criticism of the government in Egyptian media can become cause for harassment or complete suppression.

A presidential decree announced in June now gives the president the power to name the presidents and deans of public universities in a blatant effort to silence political dissent on the campus — and so it continues.

For some, like novelist and columnist Alaa al-Aswany, these repressive measures may have come as a surprise. Al-Aswany, who was initially one of al-Sisi's most ardent supporters and who cheered the earliest efforts at silencing and even massacring the supporters of the ousted president Morsi, announced on June 24 that he would stop writing his weekly column in al-Masry al-Youm, because as per his tweets, difference of opinion is no longer allowed.

For others, including the Egyptian Revolutionary Socialists, it has been clear from the start that al-Sisi's counterrevolution aims to re-instate Mubarak's regime and police state without his person, and that the persecution of Morsi's supporters has been part of a plan to eliminate not only the Brotherhood but all the forces that brought about the Egyptian revolution. [1]

"The massacres of today are only the first steps on the roadmap of the counterrevolution," said their official statement in condemnation of the murderous dispersal of the Rabaa sit-in. [2]

Toxic Political Environment

Surprising or not, the current situation in Egypt remains discouraging to everyone who shared the aspirations of the 2011 revolutionary struggle for social justice and civil liberty. As recent articles have reported, activists feel that the political environment has become stifling and even toxic. [3]

Those who in 2011 were fighting for a better Egypt are now fighting for their own survival, chased by a brutal state security, vilified by mainstream media in total absence of the rule of law, and with

little attention from a public which is either complacent with the status quo or shackled by despair of any attempts to change it.

Last December, Egyptian television went on a rampage for several days against Ahmed Maher and Mohamed Adel, following their arrest on charges of violating the anti-protest law. Talk show hosts accused the activists of treason and of upholding “an unpatriotic foreign agenda” after they aired recorded phone conversations that were allegedly made by them. The accusations were made with total impunity, without questioning why and how the conversations were recorded and leaked.

This past August, television networks aired several hours of ousted president Mubarak’s defense in which his lawyer elaborated on the claims that what transpired in January and February 2011 was not a revolution or even a genuine mass uprising, but a conspiracy hatched out by ill-intentioned and self-serving saboteurs.

Uncertain and Difficult Prospects

Naturally, the million dollar question remains : can the counterrevolutionary forces be curbed and the tides of oppression reversed in the foreseeable future ? This question is hard to answer under the best circumstances, but in Egypt the task is nearly impossible given the absence of venues where dissent can be expressed and the state’s ability to forge and fabricate indicators of economic and social change.

The presidential elections of last May are a good case in point. Despite media hype and prominent displays of support for al-Sisi, the polls appeared empty on the election days — suggesting that many who presumably were not in support of the presidential candidate, but had resigned themselves to his predetermined victory, opted out of voting.

The voting period was extended from two days to three, government employees were given the day off, and statements were made about issuing fines to qualified voters who abstain. In the end, al-Sisi was declared the winner of 96% of the votes of 46% of the country’s eligible voters, a result tarnished by the events of the election process and hardly indicative of the mass support that the media claim he enjoys.

So far, and as a recent article in the state paper *Al-Ahram Weekly* noted, President al-Sisi has yet to articulate any public policy or strategic plan for development. A professor of political science at Cairo University told the newspaper that al-Sisi could afford to remain without one because of his reliance on “popular support and the army.” [4]

While certain doubts can be cast over the president’s popular support, the power he accrues from his control of the army, one of the country’s largest institutions — which maintains control of a sizable part of industrial production and the country’s resources, an undisclosed budget, and a labor force of annually drafted young men — cannot be overstated.

It is still easy to see, however, that both the interim government of 2013-2014 and the one which formed under al-Sisi’s presidency have failed to address the immediate concerns of the mass of Egyptians, 40% of whom live under exceedingly pressing conditions of poverty. Instead, there have been discussions of austerity measures, and calls upon the workers to halt their protests and demands for higher wages.

In June, the price of gasoline was raised causing the inevitable price hikes. Rolling blackouts lasting up to several hours were a daily event in most parts of the country over the summer, and serious

water shortage has been reported in several areas around the country.

A megaproject was announced in August that involves widening the Suez Canal and increasing the maritime service that the Suez Canal Company can offer to passing ships. The government has issued certificates that promise 12% annual interest as a way to fund the project.

According to *Al-Ahram*, 14.5 billion pounds have been raised out of a targeted 60 billion pounds. The feasibility and expected productivity of this project remains to be verified by independent sources.

Yet the success or failure of al-Sisi and his government in leading the country out of its disastrous economic and social condition is not the only factor determining the length of his presidency, or how long he continues draconian measures to suppress dissent. There is also the question of foreign support, which in the Egyptian case translates into U.S. and Saudi support.

As president al-Sisi readied himself in mid-September to attend the United Nations General Assembly meeting, president Obama was talking of counter-terrorism efforts with the support of allies in the region. It is no secret that al-Sisi (together with the Saudi king) is a primary candidate for such an alliance.

While ISIS (or ISIL) has been named the primary target of this alliance, it will be easy to direct some of these efforts against both the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, as well as whomever is deemed a threat to the alliance regardless of their affiliation. Naturally, such a scenario bodes ill for the pursuit of Palestinian rights and of civil liberties for the people in the region.

The power of the most reactionary Saudi government can only grow with the alliance and with it, the willingness to bankroll al-Sisi's repressive efforts. One can also safely assume that the United States will keep the military aid flowing and close its eyes to atrocious practices on the part of both the Egyptian and the Israeli governments — the wave of popular American opposition to the latest assault on Gaza notwithstanding.

Last but not least, there remains the subjective assessment of the feasibility of continuing what was started in 2011 : to continue to push for revolutionary change in the region and to demand social justice, civil liberties and an end to state terrorism.

It is within this context that supporters of progressive change around the world must not be fooled by this anti-terrorism show. It is a show conducted by some of the world's most reactionary forces. Its chances of success in uprooting terrorism are no higher than its chances in uprooting any revolutionary struggles for a better future.

Noha Radwan

P.-S.

* « Protesting Injustice ». Against the Current (#173), November-December 2014.

<http://www.solidarity-us.org/>

Notes

[1] <http://revsoc.me/statements/sqt-lkhwn-ltmyq-lthwr-l-ltdym-lnzm-ln-nfwwd/>

[2] <http://revsoc.me/statements/ysqt-hkm-lskr-ysqt-lsysy-qyd-lthwr-lmdd/>

[3] Available on ESSF (article 33456), [Egypt : Strangers in the Crowd - “revolutionaries stand by themselves facing the storm”](#).

[4] <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/7118/17/Riding-the-wave.aspx>