

Interview with the Egyptian Socialist Party

Sunday 10 November 2019, by [HABASHI Mamdouh](#), [HARRISON Patrick](#), [HESHAM Dr. Muhammad](#) (Date first published: 26 October 2011).

In September, I spoke to Mamdouh Habashi & Dr Muhammad Hesham, members of the Egyptian Socialist Party (ESP), about developments in Egypt since the January 25 uprising against dictator Hosni Mubarak.

What effect have the ongoing protests in Tahrir square since Mubarak's downfall on February 11 had?

Mamdouh: Many of the young people, they don't have any experience in political activities. So many of them think that all kinds of political means of generating pressure would match for everything everytime. So they think "with a sit-in strike we could drop Mubarak!" - and therefore a sit-in strike would be the magic means for everything - disregarding the surroundings & conditions! This was the context of the sit-in before Ramadan.

Just to convince young people who are enthusiastic that everytime has its own means, and that you should be flexible enough to think about the boundaries & conditions first, and how to choose your proper means in this time, in this place and for these people - this is not easy!

Even among the young people in our own party; some are convinced that we have to continue with the sit-in, no matter the cost - we should pay with our lives! Others asked, "how could we leave our comrades who are sitting-in?" But in the end, the strike had only some hundreds. To convince the youth that these kinds of means can have the opposite effect of what we are aiming to achieve, and that for every kind of political activity, you need the support of the masses behind you - this is not easy.

When the counter-revolutionary forces have succeeded in making a gap between the revolutionary peak and the masses, we have to confess that & face that - we cannot be misled by our wishful thinking. It's not good for achieving revolutionary advances that you play the hero without looking to the results.

What is the role of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF, in power since Mubarak's ousting)?

Mamdouh: After getting rid of Mubarak, this uprising, this intifada was without a head. So we have to accept this new leadership of the military government - there was no other possibility. The revolutionary forces were not able or capable to form a leadership, so we had to accept the army regime - although we know that the army leadership is a major part of the old regime. We have no illusions about that.

Thanks to America's \$1.3 billion annual aid to the military, we have quite a big part of the economy now ruled by the army leadership - so their task now is not defending the country but working in the construction industry, in agriculture, in the tourism industry; they are involved in every sector. So they have become a part of the ruling class. Now, they make policy with the goal of keeping as much

as possible of the old structures.

But masses must learn this by their own experience, and not in the abstract. And positive perceptions of the military have begun to shift a little bit, because of the attitudes of the SCAF in many situations since February 11. The demands of the revolution have been formulated very clearly, but the military council just plays with them – everything that has been achieved since then was only achieved under pressure.

Muhammad: The general feeling amongst the people is that the SCAF is failing all their dreams, all their demands and ambitions. The SCAF has given promises to improve situations, to be better than the previous regime – but so far the people have yet to see any kind of radical change. You have to press the SCAF all the time [to win any demands] – they don't want to recognise that the country has changed, that people will no longer accept what was accepted just one year ago.

What do you think of the recent incident in the Sinai in which Israel killed 6 soldiers, and the storming of the Israeli Embassy on September 9?

Mamdouh: I am not very comfortable with that – with the killing of Egyptian soldiers, but also with the storming of the embassy. I think the only outcome of that would be empowering the SCAF to raise the margin of oppression, to justify its position against democracy. The achievement for the revolutionary camp is zero. What do we have when we enter the embassy? It's nothing, like burning the flag – not more than a symbol. Fighting the symbol cannot replace the real battle. I think many of the collaborators of the old regime have misused the hatred of the people!

Muhammad: The ESP is not in favour of any violent action. But at the same time, if people cannot see some sort of change, you cannot blame them for their reactions. It's not about a conflict of religion between Muslims & Jews but about Israel as a state based on discrimination; some Islamists think in terms of a religious war, but people in general do not. They witness the oppression that is happening in Palestine without any good reason. And when the incident in the Sinai occurred, the people expected the government to take action – to condemn Israel, to withdraw the Egyptian ambassador, to complain to the UN, anything – but the government did nothing. So people's anger is quite justified.

How has the ESP attempted to take on a leading role in the revolutionary process?

Mamdouh: Since January 25 have issued a number of declarations on every situation – even with the storming of the embassy. But we have set ourselves a special target now. We consider this uprising of January 25 not the revolution, but just the start of a new, long revolutionary tide. We see Egyptian history as long waves of tide and ebb; the last tide was started with the revolution of 1919, after world war one, and the Nasser era was just the end of this wave – ended by the 1967 war. Then started an ebb in revolution, which ended on January 25. Now we have a new wave which could take many years or decades.

Therefore we don't look to the next elections as the end of the revolution, as the SCAF and many other political forces try to convince the people – to give the elections legitimacy. But the government created by the next elections will not have the only legitimacy, and not even the best. Our task is to create a new legitimacy, a parallel and revolutionary legitimacy

The new parliament will be comprised of those who have money – for sure, that is not the left, and especially not the left forces which have formed after the uprising! They are the Mubarakists without Mubarak, who are still in power and adapting themselves to the new situation; they are the liberal conservatives, the Egyptian bourgeoisie, with or against the Mubarakists, and they are the

Islamists, with all of their shadow parties.

They all have something in common – they are not with the revolution, they do not want a radical change in policy. They reduce the demands of the revolution to this ridiculous word, “corruption”, pretending that, if we eliminate corruption everything will be just fine. This is a deception, because corruption is an element in capitalism, which cannot function without it. The main issue is not corruption but the policies which have led to it, and have led to the crisis that we are living in.

It would be great if the revolutionary youth of Tahrir understood this to be the case, but they do not. This is the process which we are going through.

Mudhammad: We have started working on building the party immediately after the revolution; now we have more than 1000 members. We expect this number to increase in the coming months; we are organising activities – conferences, seminars, etc – in different governorates, and we have branches now in places like Mansoura, Aswan, Luxor and Alexandria. The main task now is to build the party. This is the priority for us. Our aim is to grow to at least 3000 members by the end of the year.

Who supports these counter-revolutionary forces?

Mamdouh: The counter-revolutionary forces are quite organised and quite powerful, with very strong financial backing. They are supported by three main powers abroad – the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia. The US wants to keep Egypt inside the imperialist enclosure of the neoliberal policies and the dependancy on the global north, as it was; Israel & Saudi Arabia are just the hands of the US in the region – although they have their own agendas also, as, if Egypt stands up, they will not have any room to move.

For some years now there has been a lot of independant union activity outside of the formal state-controlled unions. How has the ESP related to this?

Muhammad: We have members involved in union activity in Mahalla, in Cairo and other places – there are different left groups working to organise independant trade unions, and now more than 150 have been established. A considerable number of our new members not previously involved in politics are working in independant unions. But still we have a lot of work to do – many factories still have no unions, in many places workers are still deprived of this right. The ESP & other parties are working hard on this.

We do face lots of legal problems, and lots of practical problems; some have to do with the attitude of the authorities to these independant organisations, and others to do with the position of the Muslim Brotherhood, who seek to divert these unions from their main objectives and end strikes. We have been struggling to have a new law issued recognising the freedom of unions – and of society in general.

Some of the new independant unions have got formal registration and are working legally, but others are working in a de facto manner and haven't yet gained legal status. This is another problem, because the situation of these unions is fragile – we can face sanctions or legal problems for working in these unions, and we can also face harassment.

What other issues has the ESP been campaigning around?

Muhammad: One of the main areas of interest to the party is campaigning for economic rights, especially for people in informal settlements. Cairo is surrounded at least 26 regions of these which are defined by the authorities as very dangerous areas to live; one of them comprises more than one million people, and this problem affects between 12 and 15 million people across Egypt. So it's very

serious. In 2008 there was a landslide in the settlement of Al-Duwayqa, which left more than 100 people dead, in addition to hundreds injured and thousands made homeless. Many of these people are still homeless today, they have not been offered any housing or any sort of compensation.

A group of young people are working in this area, raising awareness among inhabitants of their rights - rights to housing, to health and other human rights. The main success in this area is to have contacts with the people of these places, to make it known that we are defending their rights to a better life and we are with them. We are also encouraging these people to form their own organisations to defend their rights; there were a series of demonstrations and the strikes by the people of these settlements in August, in which the ESP also participated.

We are also working on the question of women's rights: the ESP is in favour of complete equality between men and women in all areas of life; we cannot think of a socialist society without the elimination of all forms of discrimination. The Muslim Brotherhood & other islamists say they support women's rights, but they have their own understanding of what that means - they are against women owning possessions, for example, and think of women as inferior and subordinate to men. The Law of Nationality and the Law of Personal Issues (sometimes referred to as Family Law) both discriminate against women, and we want to see radical changes to these - but again, the Muslim Brotherhood are against any kind of change to these. One of the good sides of the revolution has been the important and active participation of women - young people, housewives, all different ages and backgrounds - and this was one of the decisive factors in Tahrir square.

One of the contributions of the ESP has been its position on environmental issues; we have a special section of our platform dedicated to this serious problem. This is a global issue that requires co-ordinated action to stop dangers to the environment, but we also face specific problems here in Egypt. In a city like Cairo, it's not confined to air pollution, but one that impacts on every citizen's wellbeing - through issues such as garbage collection, access to clean water, etc. Such problems are felt most in the informal settlements. The ESP also includes members working on specific issues such as clean, safe energy.

Right now students and staff are on strike at the American University of Cairo - what can you tell me about political activism on campuses in Egypt?

Muhamamd: Since 2005, there is a very strong movement growing for independannce from both governments and the security forces. Since January 25, three or four main groups have been co-operating in different universities. Last Sunday the 11th, there was a protest called by these groups - 5000 staff marched to cabinet headquarters and met with the Prime Minister, Essam Sharaf, and the SCAF, to raise our demands - to get rid of all leaders appointed under Mubarak - all directors, all deans, etc, as well as to improve the situations of academics and of general staff. But their position is to refuse to make any radical change - in the universities or in any other field.

The rule now is that SCAF do not respond unless they are under pressure - this is the case in all sectors of society that want to remove leaders which are part of the old regime - so we are set to have a general strike in all universities on October 1st, the start of the academic year. At the same time there is also a call for a general strike in schools; such activities will affect almost every Egyptian family, as each family has a student, or a teacher - so this is affecting 40 million, or something like that. And we expect other sectors of society to join too; there have been recent strikes by doctors in some hospitals, for example, and they are prepared for more activities to take place in the near future.

The SCAF is unwilling to make any reforms or solve any problems - but these are real problems, not just about salaries but demands for structural reforms. The SCAF wants to limit these reforms to the

minimum, which, in return, leads to much anger. So we expect more confrontations in the future, and I think these upcoming activities will be decisive in this; they are well organised, affect large groups of people, and they threaten to stop all functioning of society.

The ESP and other left forces recently formed a socialist front, the Coalition of Socialist Forces – is this just for the elections, or for broader joint work?

Mamdouh: Election coalitions are, by definition, opportunistic – we must differentiate these, then, from social fronts. These are long-acting, deeper in the society and have very clear demands & legitimacy. The elections are a battle, but not even the most decisive one. Even the next parliament, the next government – they will not be able to solve any of the country's problems.

There are some theoretical differences between the left forces, but these are not the main issue. You cannot expect after 60 years of dictatorship, that the left will just at once unite! But unification will also be a process which comes from working together. The ideological differences do show up in the means of approaching political questions – for example, in how to face the elections.

Just as creating the leadership of the revolution will be a process, so too shall there be a process of creating the parallel legitimacy besides that of the parliament, and it will take years.

Muhammad: When it comes to real battles, such as the parliament elections, or opposing the islamists, we have tried to find common grounds for work. We have issued many joint statements on certain events with other leftist groups, in Alexandria especially. And we are now looking to joint work around the issue of the reimposing of the emergency law, which was lifted for a very short time, but for more than 60 years has been in effect, and now the military council is seeking to impose it more broadly. There is another law, too, which was introduced in the months after February 11 – the anti-demonstration & anti-strikes law, which we are struggling to change.

Any single force cannot face all these challenges alone.

On the other hand we have also helped each other through joint work – for instance we have a problem in finding offices; all of the leftist groups are very poor, and struggle with resources, so we solve this problem by finding offices for several groups – which is happening in Alexandria, in Mansoura and many other places.

It is the dream to find one unified party, but sometimes quick unity can be more dangerous than working separately if there is no base for it to continue sustainably.

Patrick Harrison
Mamdouh Habashi
Dr Muhammad Hesham

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