

Egypt reaches the boiling point

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At least 15,000 protesters jammed Cairo's huge Tahrir Square January 25 in the biggest political demonstration seen in the Egyptian capital in more than 30 years. Tens of thousands more people turned out for demonstrations in provincial cities as well. At least two people were killed in clashes with the Egyptian state's security forces.

But rather than be intimidated by police repression, protesters were able to turn the tables on Egypt's notoriously violent cops, and beat up several. And as a follow-up to the demonstration, a range of secular, democratic organizations have called for a national strike on January 26.

The movement has put a spotlight on the U.S.-backed police state ruled by Hosni Mubarak, the 83-year-old dictator despised for presiding over a society in which a tiny minority has amassed enormous wealth while more than 23 percent of the population of 79 million lives under the official poverty line. The resurgence of Egyptian workers' strikes and protests is now feeding into the pro-democracy movement.

International Socialist Review editor Ahmed Shawki, recently returned from Cairo, and Egyptian-American activist Mostafa Omar spoke to Lee Sustar about the significance of the protests, and the social and political forces that gave rise to them.

WHAT IMPACT has the uprising in Tunisia had in Egypt?

Ahmed Shawki: Everyone in Egypt is talking about Tunisia. The uprising there has brought into focus in Egypt longstanding issues about the lack of democracy, as well as economic issues.

What you have is an accumulation of grievances at all levels of society over the exigencies of daily life. Food prices are rising and will continue to rise. Then there are the high unemployment levels, homelessness and a lack of opportunity for young people. These same issues are at the center of the struggle in Tunisia, and people were inspired by the action there.

Mostafa Omar: A number of Tunisian protesters on Facebook were giving advice to the Egyptian protesters regarding tactics.

For example, most of the protests organized by the democracy movement in the last few years numbered about 300 to 400 people. The police would usually break them up or arrest large numbers of people.

This time, things were different. There is a somewhat unified leadership, and it did some preparatory work for the demonstration. Following the advice of the Tunisians, the organizers in Cairo decided they would not meet in one place. Instead, they met in different locations and converged on a number of different government buildings, where they would then unite. As a result, they defeated the police.

In the past, the police would sometimes tolerate demonstrations, but then control them through violence or arrests. This time, they failed. Some protesters converged at the parliament building and attempted to storm it. Some turned out at the radio and TV headquarters, where they attempted to

go in. The largest protest in Cairo was in Tahrir Square in the city center.

The second problem for the police was that they didn't expect the numbers. They thought the demonstration in Cairo would be a few thousand, but there were at least 10,000 in Tahrir Square, and more in other places.

WHAT ABOUT the protests outside Cairo?

Ahmed: In Alexandria, the police were very aggressive, and used rubber bullets to try to break up the crowd. But people held their ground. This is despite the fact that police are, as usual, arresting key activists and harassing their families.

Mostafa: The police did attack the demonstrations in a number of places with rubber bullets and water cannons. They allowed the demonstrations to proceed and then attacked them. But that didn't work. People actually attacked the security forces. There are a number of reports of people beating the hell out of the security forces and a fascinating video of protesters chasing the police.

The size and scale of the protests outside Cairo is the government's biggest problem. In Suez, people refused to be dispersed and fought a kind of guerilla battle with police. In Alexandria, there was a mass demonstration of tens of thousands, followed by meetings at central squares. There were fascinating scenes—people brought huge posters with Mubarak's face, and were burning them in the street. Elsewhere, in a number of cities in the Nile Delta—a very industrialized era—the demonstrations were most militant as well. It was almost like a national uprising.

In Cairo, there were a number of prominent opposition figures involved. The main one is the former candidate for president, Ayman Nour, who sat in with the occupiers in Tahrir Square.

ARE THERE any precedents for the scale of these protests? Who is leading them?

Mostafa: This hasn't happened since 1977, when Tahrir Square was occupied to protest price hikes mandated by the International Monetary Fund.

The leadership of the unified opposition comes out of the parliament elections that were completed in December. Since the vote was completely rigged to give the Mubarak regime an overwhelming majority, about 80 or 90 former members of parliament formed a shadow parliament and brought a number of opposition parties into it. These people more or less coordinated the call for the protest.

Some of the youth held a number of workshops to discuss how to prepare the action in terms of tactics. The Muslim Brotherhood—the largest opposition group in Egypt—didn't officially endorse the protests, but allowed its members to participate on a personal basis.

The demonstration was organized in about 10 days. The organizers chose January 25—Police Day, the day in 1951 when police fought the British occupiers. The organizers wanted to defame the police on a day the police were celebrating their so-called patriotic holiday. The intention, in part, was to highlight police brutality. The protest also comes close to the anniversary of the 1977 uprising against the IMF and neoliberalism.

The organizers knew that this protest would be different, however. One indication was the number of suicides in recent days as people followed the example of the martyr in Tunisia—Mohamed Bouazizi, the unemployed college graduate who set himself on fire after police shut down his fruit-vending stall.

The *New York Times* actually underestimated the number of suicides and attempted suicides in

Egypt. Some have jumped off bridges, some jumped off buildings, and a number cut their wrists in front of the parliament building. That's how the organizers of the demonstration knew things were boiling over.

WHAT ARE the politics of the opposition?

Ahmed: The Muslim Brotherhood gave a nominal nod to the mobilization but will not actually back the demonstrations. There is, however, broad support for the protests across social classes.

Even the sections of the middle class that might be in favor of repressing the protests have a fairly hard view that Gamal Mubarak, the president's son, should not be his successor. There's a wide layer of the political class that will not allow the functioning of the state to be a family operation.

So now the protests have raised the stakes around the question of whether Mubarak will run for the presidency again. And the boycott of the parliamentary elections has left that body even more of a rubber stamp than usual. The state's reliance on emergency laws to maintain itself is clearer than ever.

Mostafa: The liberal opposition has been fighting to lift the emergency laws, to hold democratic elections, and to cut the sale of natural gas to Israel. It has been able to, at best, mobilize 1,000 or 2,000 people to protests. So the media have been saying that the January 25 protests are unprecedented.

In fact, if you take into account the number of workers who have been involved in strikes and labor demonstrations in recent years, it is around 1 million. The workers movement has been building up for a number of years, gaining steam and winning concessions from the government. The government didn't always come through. But workers won their strikes, at least on paper, and have felt more confident.

All that was building up before Tunisia. What Tunisia did—and you can't underestimate it—was change the equation. People said, "Tunisia is small country. If they can put tens of thousand on streets, burn themselves alive to send a message, and change the regime, we are going to do it, too."

You can see this by reading letters to opposition newspapers. A few weeks ago—after the parliamentary elections were rigged—there was a feeling of hope. Now, they say, there is a reason for hope—we have to have a revolution.

All this is remarkable, because there has been a popular animosity against Tunisia dating from the Sadat era in the 1970s. When the two countries play in soccer matches, there is often bloodshed—people have been killed. Now there are Tunisian flags flying all over Egypt.

WILL THE political demands of the protest merge with the economic demands of workers?

Mostafa: I'm not sure who put the call out for a national strike. But what happened on January 25 in the textile city of Mahalla is telling. A demonstration that started in the morning with 200 people had, by the end of the day, reached 45,000 people. I suspect a lot of workers who have been protesting want to continue demonstrating.

The other remarkable thing is that the Egyptian national trade union federation—led by people appointed by the government—has partially broken with the government in the two weeks following the Tunisian uprising. They want price controls, an increase in wages and a system of subsidized outlets for basic food. People can't find staples like tea and oil. For the union officials to demand this is unheard of, because these people supported neoliberalism. That is the impact of Tunisia.

Meanwhile, the conditions facing workers are growing worse. The official unemployment figure is 12 percent, but the real figure is 24 or 25 percent. Food prices are out of control. One kilo of tomatoes—a staple good—is \$2; it used to be 35 cents not long ago. That's prohibitively expensive in a country where government workers make only about \$26 a month. The question of hunger is real. And now the IMF is pressuring the government to remove the subsidies on gasoline prices.

That's a big reason why—and people in the West often miss this—there has been an increase in the workers' struggle over the last three years. Every day, there's a strike—and on the day of action, there were 12 major strikes. The government settled them right away by promising everything they wanted.

THE U.S. media focuses always on the supposed threat of “Islamic radicalism” in Egypt as in the rest of the Middle East. Is it a factor in this struggle?

Mostafa: Twice now, the Muslim Brotherhood has abstained from any call for a national strike or a national demonstration. First in 2006, and again this year, it didn't support the day of anger.

They are still the biggest political force in the country, but they refuse to enter into a confrontation with the government. It's really the workers' movement and the radical youth that are the driving force, not the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood is still the main opposition party with the most clout, but it isn't behind this at all.

A lot of young people and workers coming into the movement in the last two weeks are open to democratic and socialist ideas. Even a lot of the young supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood are open to a different analysis—one that doesn't just see the conflict as Islam vs. the West. On one protest, for example, an obviously religious man carried a sign that said it doesn't matter if you're Muslim or Christian, join the struggle.

That's a big change from January 1, when violent attacks on Christian churches made it seem like the country was on the verge of civil war between Muslims and Christians. Last year saw more attacks on Christian churches than any time in modern Egyptian history. But today, there are many Christians who have joined in common struggle with Muslims against the police and corrupt state, even though church leaders called on them to stay away from the protests.

All this means that there is an opening for the left—especially the socialists—to grow. There is new blood in the movement, and the Muslim Brotherhood isn't fighting. It's the left that is taking up this fight, along with new radicals.

WHAT CAN supporters internationally do to assist the Egyptian movement?

Mostafa: Mohamed ElBaradei, the former international inspector of atomic weapons and a leader of the democracy movement, recently called on Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to stand up for human rights in Egypt and the Middle East.

But this is completely wrong. The U.S. has been a key supporter of the regime in Tunisia and by far the most important backer of the Egyptian state. The U.S. government is partially responsible for the atrocities committed by the Mubarak regime, and it doesn't really want democratic reform.

Activists in the U.S., therefore, have an important role to play in demanding that the U.S. end its support for the Egyptian government and its efforts to maintain its corrupt and authoritarian rule.

P.S.

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