

INTERVIEW

# Conversation with an Egyptian socialist

Friday 25 February 2011, by [NAGUIB Sameh](#), [OMAR Mostafa](#) (Date first published: 23 February 2011).

**Members of the Revolutionary Socialists in Egypt endured years of police-state repression while organizing for democracy and labor rights. Because of these courageous efforts, the socialists were able to play a critical role in organizing the first demonstrations on January 25 that galvanized the successful uprising against dictator Hosni Mubarak. Their central place continued as the movement grew.**

**Sameh Naguib is a leading member of the Revolutionary Socialists. He talked to Mostafa Omar in Cairo about the dynamics of the Egyptian revolution and what lies ahead.**

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**MOSTAFA OMAR - THESE ARE incredible times for all revolutionaries in Egypt. But as January 25 approached, did you expect any of this to happen?**

SAMEH NAGUIB - OF COURSE, we understood theoretically that the political situation has been volatile for a number of years, and that an outbreak of revolution was a possibility. But we had no idea it would happen on the 25<sup>th</sup>. The massive numbers of demonstrators who took part in the protests of that day and their militancy was unprecedented.

We were used to people putting out calls for mass days of action, only to have 100 or 200 people show up, and quickly get routed by the security forces. But on January 25, the numbers of protesters swelled in Cairo, Alexandria and city after city as the day went on.

Protesters successfully fended off one attack after another by police. They were throwing rocks at the police. People were coming out of their homes to join us. Women were ululating and throwing candy at us. By the end of the 25<sup>th</sup>, we realized that a revolutionary moment had begun.

**WHAT WAS the role of Revolutionary Socialists and other left forces in mobilizing for the January 25<sup>th</sup> protest?**

WE AND the rest of the left, along with April 6<sup>th</sup> Youth Movement, played a key role in mobilizing for January 25. The Muslim Brotherhood didn't support the call for protests that day because as usual, they don't like to support actions which they don't control. So the left played a leading role.

We and the other left forces met and developed a strategy for action on the 25<sup>th</sup>. For example, we decided to begin the demonstration in different locations around Cairo, and then march on Tahrir Square. We did this so as to preempt the security forces from concentrating their forces against any one central location to break our action before it started, as they have always done in the past. That was a useful tactic.

Plus, to be honest, the security forces were unprepared for the massive numbers of people who turned out. They were caught off guard.

**THE WESTERN and Egyptian media keep repeating that this was simply a youth revolution organized through Facebook and other social media. Can you give us a sense of the class nature of the revolution in those first few days?**

YOUNG PEOPLE from different social classes, all with their own grievances against the regime, did play a leading role in igniting this revolution. But the role of the working class in the revolution was central from day one.

For example, the city of Suez, a working-class city with a long history of anti-British and anti-Zionist struggles, was at the forefront of the revolution. Workers in Suez poured out of the factories of the city and into its streets, and they sacrificed the first martyrs on day one. Sheikh Hafez Salama, a leader of the anti-British colonialism struggles of the 1940s in Suez and later in the war with Israel was on the streets with the revolutionaries. He even came and joined us here in Tahrir Square.

Similarly, workers in Cairo, Alexandria and Mansoura were key players in all the events from the beginning. But workers couldn't participate as a collective force in the revolutionary struggle at that point because the capitalists went on strike and shut down production. That would change in the days before the fall of Mubarak on February 11 and in its immediate aftermath.

**THERE WERE millions of people in Tahrir, in Alexandria and elsewhere in Egypt taking part in the revolution. How did you, as Revolutionary Socialists, with modest numbers, operate and intervene in this mass movement and what were your priorities?**

FROM THE beginning, Socialists, Nasserists and others on the left played an important role in leading the protests. But as the numbers of those joining the revolution mushroomed and reached over a million in places like Cairo and Alexandria alone, we had to focus and prioritize. We chose four or five things to focus on.

We argued for the continuation of the struggle to bring down the regime and rejected all calls for negotiations with it.

We put workers' class demands front and center in all of our literature and agitation. We talked to all of our contacts and allies in the workers' movement, and we agitated for strikes to strengthen the revolution.

We called for the confiscation of the assets of big business connected with the Mubarak regime and demanded that these assets be nationalized under workers' control.

We agitated to transform the revolution from a political revolution into a social revolution. We agitated for the popular demand for a 1,200 pound minimum wage, independent unions, jobs and unemployment benefits for the unemployed and other class demands.

We issued six statements to articulate our analysis and demands. We distributed thousands and thousands in the squares, and we also used our Web site to reach all parts of the country.

**WHAT IS the role of the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest political opposition group in the country?**

THE MUSLIM Brotherhood leadership did not endorse the call for the January 25<sup>th</sup> demonstration. They usually don't support actions that they don't initiate and control. But as it became clear after

the first day that a revolution was underway, they decided to participate.

They played an important role in Tahrir and elsewhere, especially on the day, February 2, when the government sent its thugs on horses and with Molotov cocktails to attack the demonstrators.

It wasn't necessarily their numbers that made a difference—they don't have more than 15 or 20 percent political support on the street, and only one out of the 13 martyrs that day was a member of the Brotherhood. Rather, it was their level of organization that helped. They act in a highly disciplined manner, and that helped in defending the square.

They now intend to announce the formation of a new political party. Some want it formed on a civilian and non-religious basis. Others from the conservative old guard will oppose that. In other words, we expect to see divisions in their ranks.

We have seen the formation of a more liberal group, Etilaf Shabab Althawra, the Coalition of the Youth of the Revolution, which formulated a number of political demands and negotiated with the army last Monday.

This formation includes a number of activists who participated in the revolution. But they represent a middle-class liberal wing that would like to limit the revolution to a political revolution for democratic reforms, without questioning or challenging the basic capitalist system. These liberals see their role as advising and pressuring the army to replace this or that corrupt person with this or that honest technocrat.

Many of these liberals are now opposed to workers' strikes. They say workers are selfish. Some are launching an attack on strikers on Facebook. As I said, they simply want political reforms. They oppose class struggle.

Of course, we support and demand democratic reforms. But we fight for a radical democracy where the interests of workers are front and center. But we as Revolutionary Socialists do not want to stop at a political revolution. We are organizing for a social revolution led by Egyptian workers.

**THERE ARE many other radical leftists and socialists in Egypt. What is your relationship with the rest of that radical left? And are you taking any political initiatives?**

WE ALWAYS coordinate with all other left forces. For example, we are part of a front for the radical left. Together, we coordinate strike support, demonstrations, media and public statements. That's important. It's a new situation, and many forces on the left and right are taking initiatives and forming political parties.

We also have to take our own initiatives. First, we helped form committees to defend the revolution among students and workers. We are also in the midst of collecting a thousand signatures from leading militant workers to form a new workers party. This party can organize, represent and articulate the interests of the working class and push the revolution forward.

**THE EGYPTIAN working class is huge in size, and the strikes are massive and widespread. Where do you start to build such a party?**

YES, THAT is true. But we aren't starting from scratch. We have built contacts and close relationships in the working class over the previous years of struggle. At the same time, we are focusing on central sectors of the economy: workers in textiles, post office, railways, transportation, communications and cement industries.

I also think that the new movement to form independent militant unions to replace the pro-government unions will succeed, and this will aid our effort to build a workers party. It is a revolutionary moment. You take initiatives and see what happens.

**THE ARMY is running the country, issuing statements and making some concessions such as dissolving the parliament. What do you expect from the army in the next period? Will they use force against strikes?**

THE ARMY is a key part of the Egyptian economy. It controls 25 percent of the economy from industries, agricultural land and hotels, all the way to arms' trade.

The army forced Mubarak out and took over in order to attempt to slow down the rhythm of the revolution and save the system. The pressures of the revolution from below caused a split in the army leadership. Mubarak, Defense Minister Mohamed Tantawi and Vice President Omar Suleiman wanted the army to use force to end the revolution. Lt. Gen. Sami Hafez Anan, the army chief of staff—who was in Washington on January 25, by the way—refused to use force. At that point, there was no way out but to dump Mubarak.

Now, the army is calling on strikers to end their movement. That is all they can do. They aren't in a position to ban and attack strikes at the moment. The momentum so far is on the side of the workers. The army would need some time to mobilize a majority public opinion against strikers—not just middle-class liberals—before it can consider an attack on strikes.

Finally, the army is in a difficult position. The Egyptian revolution is making a huge regional and international impact. The world is looking at us. The revolution has deep causes, a tremendous breadth and a great potential to turn into a social revolution. This is different from the revolutions that took place in the Philippines against Ferdinand Marcos in the 1980s or Indonesia against Suharto in the 1990s. The role of the working class in Egypt in our revolution is more central than the role workers played in those two revolutions.

The Egyptian working class set the stage for January 25 through an intensive class struggle that has been happening since 2004. Now, it is on the move. Therefore, it is much more difficult for the ruling class here in Egypt to limit the revolution to political reforms.

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**P.S.**

\* From <http://socialistworker.org/2011/02/23/interview-with-egyptian-socialist>