

INTERVIEW

Year one of the Egyptian Revolution

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One year ago on January 25, a rebellion began in Egypt that in a matter of 18 days toppled the U.S.-backed dictator Hosni Mubarak after 30 years in power. Egypt has been transformed—but the revolution still faces many challenges. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which has ruled Egypt since Mubarak resigned, has stepped up its repression against left-wing organizations. The SCAF has new allies as well—the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist organizations that won a large majority in the new Egyptian parliament.

Mostafa Ali, a member of Egypt's Revolutionary Socialists and journalist for Ahram Online, talked about the first year of Egypt's revolution—and what comes next.

JANUARY 25 marked the start of the Egyptian Revolution one year ago. Where do things stand today, one year later?

Mostafa Ali - THE TURNOUT for the demonstrations for the one-year anniversary of the revolution have been quite massive—much larger than most people expected given the line in the media about how support for the revolution has weakened within the population.

There must have been at least one-and-a-half million people in Tahrir Square. Not only the square itself, but the bridges leading into Tahrir were packed with people. Some of the feeder marches were three to four kilometers long. There were people in some neighborhoods who hadn't even left yet while those at the beginning of the marches had already reached Tahrir.

I'm saying this because in the weeks and months before January 25, the mainstream media here have been pushing the idea that most of the population is fed up with the revolution and fed up with protests, and wants things to go back to normal—they want the wheel of production to get going again.

So the turnout was a blow to the months and months of propaganda by the military council and government newspapers who claimed most people would stay away from Tahrir. In reality, this demonstration was larger than any protest against Mubarak during the 18-day uprising.

One year ago, I'm sure that 99 percent of the people who were celebrating in Tahrir on February 11 when Mubarak fell left the square believing that the military council supported the revolution. The slogan repeated over and over again was that the army and the people were one hand.

Most people didn't return to the square after February 11 because they believed their job was done, and that the army supported the revolution and would bring about the reforms that would achieve

its demands. This allowed the military council to set the tone in the months that followed the revolution.

A year later, after everything that happened throughout this year, you can see that there's a new generation of people, many of them young people, that has developed a very sophisticated radical consciousness. As we can see in the demonstrations on the anniversaries of last year, this new generation understands now that the military council is part of the old Mubarak regime and is opposed to the revolution.

WHAT CONCLUSIONS have people reached about the military council?

THERE IS a growing consciousness that the military council acted in the way that it has because it is a key part of the ruling class, controlling somewhere between 25 percent and 40 percent of the economy—that the generals are beholden to U.S. imperial interests and to the neoliberal policies that impoverished people over the last 30 years

It took a whole year for this process of radicalization to develop. But you can see that, as a result of the victories and the defeats of the past year, this new generation of people is quite convinced that you can't continue the revolution without taking on the military council and the entire military establishment.

On the other hand, to be realistic and sober about the situation, the country is also much more divided than it was last January. There are millions of people who support the revolution and want it to continue, but there are also have big sections of the middle classes that supported the ousting of Mubarak last year, but who have jumped ship and turned against the revolution. This is exemplified by the victories that the Muslim Brotherhood achieved in the parliamentary elections.

Last year, the Muslim Brotherhood was part of the uprising against Mubarak—its leaders may have hesitated, but the organization was pulled into the struggle. This year, in Tahrir, the Muslim Brotherhood was part of the demonstrations, but it is trying to play the role of being the political arm of the military council.

If you enter Tahrir today, you'll find thousands of Muslim Brotherhood supporters who are in the square to prevent the demonstrations from challenging the military council. This actually caused a physical confrontation between thousands of protesters and the Muslim Brotherhood, on the anniversary of the first Friday of protests.

The Muslim Brotherhood came to Tahrir to celebrate the first anniversary of the revolution, but the vast majority of the protesters who were in the square and the people who support the revolution refuse the idea that this should be a celebration. They say that the revolution has not achieved its goals, and so we shouldn't celebrate. As some newspapers pointed out, that was one of the most popular chants on the demonstration: "This is a revolution, not a celebration."

This is an important development in terms of consciousness. Last year, the overwhelming number of people left it to the military council to carry out the revolution. This year, millions of people—not a majority of the population, but a significant minority—have come to believe that they must organize themselves and take matters into their own hands. They understand that the only way to continue the revolution is to organize grassroots movements and reach out to wider working-class communities.

WHY WAS the Muslim Brotherhood able to dominate the recent elections in Egypt?

ONE OF the best ways to understand the Muslim Brotherhood is to think of the Democratic Party in

this country. It's an organization that is perceived as being reformist, but it's committed to capitalism. There are major differences, of course, but that's a good way to understand how the Brotherhood is viewed in the eyes of many of its supporters.

The Muslim Brotherhood never really opposed, on principle, any of the economic policies of the Mubarak regime over the last 30 years. It criticized some of the excesses—for example, Mubarak's privatization programs that impoverished millions of people. But the Brotherhood has never on principle been against privatization.

The Muslim Brotherhood and its leaders are very committed to capitalism—much more so even than Mubarak's own former ruling party, the National Democratic Party, or NDP. They believe even more strongly in free market policies. But they did have to criticize some of the most flagrant policies of Mubarak's economic policies in order to continue to connect with their own base.

After February 11, there were many struggles and demonstrations in Tahrir, with more and more of them developing into protests against the military council. The Muslim Brotherhood boycotted 90 percent of these demonstrations and explicitly told its supporters to stay out of Tahrir. Ironically, it was funny—some of the Muslim Brotherhood people who were in Tahrir on January 25 hadn't set foot in the square since February 11 of last year.

Many people now look at the Muslim Brotherhood and understand that it wants to play the role of being the political wing for the military council. The ruling class in this country has the military council as the physical force protecting the system, and now the Muslim Brotherhood, with its Freedom and Justice Party, the largest party in the country, is the new political wing of the ruling class. People call them the NDP with long beards—the saying goes that we have the NDP again with NDP policies, but carried out by a man in a beard with a Koran in his hands.

But there's also a contradictory situation. Clearly, millions of people voted for the Freedom and Justice Party and support the Muslim Brotherhood.

There were two types of votes. There are some people who voted for the Muslim Brotherhood on an ideological basis—who see it as a party that will push the values of Islam. But there are also many people who voted for the Muslim Brotherhood because they believe it will bring about social justice.

The Muslim Brotherhood was an opposition party for so long. It was repressed by Mubarak, and thousands of its cadre were imprisoned and tortured, so many people look at them as fighters and militants. Moreover, the Brotherhood leaders are Islamists, so they are perceived as not being as corrupt as Mubarak—and because they were kept out of power, they don't have any involvement in the corruption and exploitation of the regime.

Many of those who voted for the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist parties believe these parties will redistribute the wealth, fight poverty, improve education and health care, and go after all the corrupt businessmen who destroyed this country—because, after all, they are honorable good Muslims. A lot of people will say they voted for the Muslim Brotherhood to give them a chance, and if they don't deliver, we will vote them out, and go back to the streets and continue to fight for the demands of the revolution.

So the vote for the Muslim Brotherhood was not a reactionary vote. Many of the people who voted for the Brotherhood support the revolution, but they haven't yet reached the consciousness of the younger generation that has radicalized over the course of the year and that understands that going through the parliamentary process won't fulfill their social and economic interests.

This is very important. There's not a simple split between a reactionary part of the population that

follows the Muslim Brotherhood and those who support the revolution against the Brotherhood.

WHAT KIND of effect is this contradictory situation having within the Muslim Brotherhood?

THE MUSLIM Brotherhood leaders are under tremendous pressure to deliver on a number of issues, now that they are the main party in parliament. The expectations are actually quite wild—that the Muslim Brotherhood will really turn this system upside down. So the leaders understand that they must, on the one hand, deliver very quickly on a number of issues, but on the other hand, figure out a way of dampening expectations.

At the same time, a lot of young people in the Muslim Brotherhood are very unhappy with the obvious alliance between the leadership of the organization and the military council. The military council has attacked everybody in the revolutionary camp over the past year, from leftists to liberals to workers. The only people the army hasn't attacked, either ideologically or physically, is the Muslim Brotherhood—instead, the military council has met with the Brotherhood and allowed it a smooth ride to take control of parliament.

In fact, the Muslim Brotherhood's daily newspaper has been attacking the Revolutionary Socialists and other left-wing organizations with articles meant to incite people against the left. There was a headline in the lead-up to the anniversary that warned people about the anarchists who plan to burn down Egypt on January 25. This caused an uproar—that the Muslim Brotherhood paper looks exactly like a Mubarak paper used to.

Many members of the Muslim Brotherhood are therefore aware that their leadership has entered into an unholy alliance with part of the Mubarak regime that repressed the organization for so long—and they aren't happy at all. Especially on their Facebook pages and the Internet, young members tell people that they feel ashamed of what some people in their leadership are doing, and they distance themselves from the outright reactionary politics.

So the Muslim Brotherhood is facing pressure from many different directions. But it's clear that the Brotherhood leaders will move ahead in certain ways. The organization and its political party are controlled by a large number of big businessmen who are very committed to neoliberal politics and policies. The millionaires who control the Brotherhood are now, according to the media, in negotiations with former Mubarak economists and ministers.

In other words, the Muslim Brotherhood is not only in alliance with the military council, but it has opened channels of communication with Mubarak's old NDP. All that is going to increase tensions and opposition, even within the organization.

HOW HAS this new generation that you've talked about developed its consciousness about the tasks of the revolution?

I THINK people cut their teeth in a number of very important grassroots campaigns over the summer. These were mostly defensive campaigns. The biggest was "No to Military Trials"—thousands of people have been organizing around the country against the fact that the military has put 12,000 people on trial—three or four times more than the number of people subjected to a military trial during 30 years of Mubarak's rule. Thousands of people participated in that campaign, and it began to develop people politically.

Another activity was a popular grassroots media campaign called "Kazeboon," which means "Liars." A short film, about 10 or 11 minutes, was made a couple of months ago about the crimes of the

military council, and some of the activists who gained a lot of experience in the No to Military Trials campaigns, started bringing projectors and screens into working class neighborhoods to show the film.

Hundreds of people would turn out in dozens of poor neighborhoods to watch the film. So this became a medium to reach poor and working class people and initiate political discussion. Many of those film showings were attacked by supporters of the military council, and so people had learned how to defend the film showings.

This was very useful actually in the lead-up to the anniversary of the revolution. Thousands and thousands of people got to watch what the military council was doing. They got to watch how the army attacked people in Tahrir over and over again, and singled out women especially for abuse.

It was really a brilliant tactic, because the mainstream media is still controlled by the government and the same ruling class, and it's still spewing lies about the revolutionaries and demonizing them—so we have to break out of that and create a new form of grassroots popular revolutionary media.

Those campaigns in the last few months were defensive campaigns, but they allowed all these young people to channel their energies, develop their skills and reach out to working-class communities, where they could build roots.

Part of the consciousness that has developed is that we can't stay in Tahrir Square and hold sit-ins and wait for the army to come in and massacre us. This allows the army to isolate us, politically and ideologically. Tahrir is very important as a symbol of the revolution, and we will always go back there for big events, but we have to take the revolution into every single working-class neighborhood in this country.

WHAT ABOUT the working-class movement that was so important to the overthrow of Mubarak?

IT HAS definitely been impacted by the general political situation and the last four or five months of massive attacks by the military council against the left and against working-class resistance. That, I think, dampened many people's confidence. Strike activity, which hit a high point right before February 11 and definitely helped shove Mubarak out, suffered a lot in the fall.

But in the last few weeks, a more sophisticated and more confident revolutionary movement has begun to rebuild itself, and I think that has had an impact in giving workers the confidence to begin to strike again.

So, for example, in the wake of mass protests at the end of January, sections of labor have announced that they plan on organizing strikes on February 11 to coincide with the deadline set by left organizations for when the military should return to the barracks. So far, port workers at Ain Sukhna on the Red Sea and Suez Canal workers are set to join the stoppage. Transport workers in Cairo, textile workers in Mahalla and ports workers in Alexandria are also discussing the possibility of striking.

On the other hand, another reason for the drop in strikes was the same as why the Muslim Brotherhood did so well in elections—that many workers are willing to wait for the new parliament to act on their demands. There are still many illusions that have to be overcome. But as a result, I think we can expect workers to start returning to protest to show that they expect their demands to be met. Only this time, they won't be protesting the NDP and Mubarak, but a parliament controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood that is continuing the old regime's attacks on the working class.

All of this is part of the radicalizing consciousness, which is most advanced among a lot of young people who understand now that winning this revolution is not going to be an easy matter. They recognize that mass demonstrations in Tahrir aren't enough, and that the ruling class is much more violent and oppressive, and willing to do whatever it takes to hold onto power.

I think this realization has set in with a lot of people, and it will help them to pace themselves for a longer-term fight. They know you can't rely on the military council or the Muslim Brotherhood, and repeat the same mistake of last year when everybody left the square and went home thinking that someone else was going to finish this revolution. There is a new generation that believes that its own self-activity will be the key to continuing the struggle.

P.S.

* From Socialist Worker (USA).

<http://socialistworker.org/2012/02/02/egyptian-revolution-after-one-year>

* Transcription by Karen Domínguez Burke and Rebecca Anshell Song.