

Egypt: The revolution continues

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Contents

- [Elections, the Muslim Brotherh](#)
- [Muslim Brotherhood versus \(...\)](#)
- [The Revolution Continues](#)

Eighteen months after mass protests and strikes ousted dictator Hosni Mubarak from power, the basic aspirations that drove Egypt's uprising remain largely unfulfilled writes Adam Hanieh in an article written before Morsi's removal of Tantawi. The vast majority of the population has seen little substantive improvement in living conditions. Political decision-making continues to be dominated by a military junta closely tied to the United States. Many of the old Mubarak apparatchiks remain firmly ensconced in positions of influence, and few have seen their ill-gotten wealth or decades of corruption challenged. Even where new political forces have entered the state structures - as has been the case following recent parliamentary and presidential elections - most appear eager to reconcile with prominent individuals and practices associated with the old regime.

Yet it would be wrong to judge the current phase of the Egyptian revolution as one of retreat based solely upon the apparent reconstitution of the Mubarak-era status quo. In the immediate aftermath of the 2011 uprising, important elements of the existing state structures underwent a partial and temporary disintegration. This was most clearly exemplified in the police and security apparatus, which largely disappeared from the streets, and in the political sphere where Mubarak's ruling party, the National Democratic Party (NDP), was disbanded. In workplaces, one of the state's most important mechanisms of control, the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), also lost influence as new independent trade unions began to emerge.

In this context, the last year and a half has seen a determined struggle by Egypt's ruling elites - solidly backed by the United States and other powers - to reverse this weakening of the state apparatus and confine the revolution to a simple cosmetic change in leadership, symbolized in the phrase oft-repeated by US government leaders of 'an orderly transition'. Their main goal has been to demobilize the new political and social forces unleashed in the course of overthrowing Mubarak, and to restore the legitimacy of the state structures and previous patterns of rule. The leading domestic actor in this process is the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), a US-backed military junta that has essentially ruled the country since Mubarak's ousting last February, acting to rehabilitate members of the old regime and frequently moving to repress demonstrations and strikes. SCAF's primary institutional ally in the state apparatus has been the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC), the country's highest legal body, which continues to be run by judges appointed under Mubarak.

Arrayed against this pole of counter-revolution are the millions of people who took to the streets for the first time in 2011 and whose political consciousness has been radically transformed through the experience. These are people who wish to see a fundamental improvement in their lives and continue to struggle for real change. A small number are organized through new political groups or in the myriad of labour and social movements that have emerged. They remain a powerful (and arguably growing) force that is pushing the revolution forward. The revolutionary process remains caught between these two poles of revolution and counter-revolution.

Elections, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Military

Confirmation of these dynamics can be seen in the complex series of events that unfolded over the first six months of 2012, the main result of which has been to bring the once-outlawed Muslim Brotherhood (MB) into government. From 28 November 2011 to 11 January 2012, parliamentary elections were held for the 508-seat People's Assembly (the name of the Egyptian parliament). With voter turnout of around 54%, the electoral bloc dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) obtained about 38% of the vote. Another Islamist grouping, the Salafist bloc, led by Al Nour Party, won around 28% to become the second largest force in the parliament. A coalition of left and socialist parties, united in the Revolution Continues Bloc, received a little under 3% and won seven seats in the Assembly.

The strong showing of the Muslim Brotherhood in these elections was not surprising. Under Mubarak, the Muslim Brotherhood was – despite being banned – a semi-legal organisation with relatively deep implantation across the country. For many years it was seen as the principal opposition to the Mubarak regime. Many other parties (including some of the parties of the Left) have only recently formed or begun to operate openly, and it was impossible to expect them to have the reach and organisational capacity of the Brotherhood. The Islamist parties were also well-funded, both from domestic sources and the Gulf states, which made a significant difference in their ability to run national campaigns. Furthermore, in the rural areas, other parties had a much weaker presence than the MB, which had built established patronage and support networks over many years.

These parliamentary elections were followed on 23 and 24 May 2012 by the first round of Presidential elections. Turnout was below 50%, and came down to a three-way split between the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi (24.78%); Ahmed Shafiq (23.66%), SCAF's preferred candidate who was a former commander of the Egyptian air force and the last prime minister under Mubarak; and Hamdeen Sabahi, a Nasserist candidate supported by much of the Left, who won 20.72% of the vote. The high vote for Sabahi – particularly in the key urban centres of Cairo, Alexandria and Port Said which he won – was a partial indication that areas often said to be dominated by Islamist supporters were not as monolithic as many analysts assumed. Sabahi's strong result in these governorates also confirmed the primarily urban character of the revolution.

The second round of the Presidential elections held on 16 and 17 June, pitted Morsi and Shafiq against one another in a run-off vote. Two days before the elections took place, however, the SCAF moved to dissolve the parliament that had been elected in January and institutionalize the military's control over the political process. They did this through a set of decrees that permitted military and state intelligence to arrest protestors, gave SCAF authority over drafting a new constitution, and the right to assume the responsibilities of Parliament until a new one was elected. SCAF's actions constituted a 'military coup by constitutional means', as it was legitimated by an earlier ruling from the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) that had declared the parliamentary elections unconstitutional and also sanctioned the running of Ahmed Shafiq in the elections despite his close relationship to Mubarak. The combined efforts of SCAF and the SCC essentially granted the military ultimate power over all legislative and budgetary matters, placing them outside of any civilian control.

SCAF's actions led to public protests and some political forces issued a call for a boycott of the second round of the Presidential elections. Turnout, however, was greater than the first round (51.85% to 46.42%) although over 3 percent of voters spoiled their ballots. Following a week's delay in announcing the result, during which time frenzied closed-door negotiations took place between the MB and SCAF, Mohammed Morsi was declared the winner with 51.73% of votes to Shafiq's

48.27%. Morsi was inaugurated President on 30 June 2012.

Many commentators portrayed Morsi's victory as a significant challenge to SCAF's domination and an electoral rejection of the Mubarak regime with which Shafiq was so closely associated. Editorials in the Wall Street Journal and New York Times, for example, described Morsi as 'Egypt's first freely-elected president' and made much of the supposed antagonism between the Muslim Brotherhood and the military generals. There is, however, a large amount of wilful deceit in such accounts. The elections could hardly be described as 'free' - they were held under conditions of military rule and were boycotted by half of the registered electorate. The candidature of Ahmed Shafiq - a clear face of the old regime - broke the so-called Political Isolation Law that had banned candidates from the Mubarak era (the SCC decided that this law was unconstitutional). The extent of the military's power was indicated in the way that parliament was simply dissolved only two days before the Presidential election was held. Numerous accounts of election fraud - particularly following the first round of the Presidential elections - led many to call for boycott or a spoilt ballot.

Moreover, it is certain that some sort of deal was achieved between SCAF and the MB that led the former to permit Morsi to become President. Despite verbal protest over SCAF's dismissal of parliament, both Morsi and the MB quickly acquiesced to the military in the period following the elections. This was most immediately shown in a farce orchestrated by the MB around the taking of the presidential oath. Morsi claimed that he would take his oath in Tahrir Square, in front of the 'people', rather than before the SCC as the military wished. He did so, but the following day immediately repeated his actions in front of the SCC - an act that effectively sanctioned the disbanding of parliament. Moreover, Morsi and the MB quickly accepted a subsequent ruling by the SCC that SCAF's dissolving of parliament was legal and the powers that were arrogated for the military would remain in place.

Muslim Brotherhood versus SCAF?

In this context, how should we understand the apparent conflict between the Muslim Brotherhood and the military? The Muslim Brotherhood, as with most Islamist movements in the region, clearly draws upon support from layers of the rural and urban poor, as well the urban 'middle class' (indicated by their strong showing in elections for associations of lawyers, doctors, engineers and other professionals). At the same time, their leadership is openly pro-capitalist and has explicitly embraced a neoliberal economic program. Central leaders of the organisation, such as Khairat Al-Shater and Hassan Malek, are millionaire businessmen. Other key business leaders associated with the MB include Safwan Thabet of the Juhayna group, Egypt's largest dairy and juice company; Mohamed Moamen of Mo'men Group, which operates the largest Egyptian fast food chain; and Abdel Rahman Seoudi, who runs a supermarket chain and agricultural export company. These individuals completely control the organisation's decision-making process (through the so-called Guidance Bureau) as well as its economic program. They have made it clear in numerous interviews that they support continued privatization, increased exposure to global financial markets, further deregulation of labour markets and more reliance on loans from international financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank.

For this reason, much like its cousin the AKP in Turkey, the Egyptian Islamist movement can be understood as the political expression of a (growing) segment of the country's bourgeoisie. The class fraction that the MB represents was able to develop a massive financial empire under Mubarak, while simultaneously facing periodic repression from the state and Mubarak-allied elites. The conflicts between the MB, the military and the old Mubarak allies remain, but these are best seen as competitive struggles within and between fractions of the same Egyptian capitalist class and state

apparatus. At root, they represent similar class interests and are united against the workers movement.

Thus, while there may well develop tensions between the rank-and-file base of the MB and its leadership (shown, for example, in the split of a significant wing of the MB youth in mid-2011 that left to form the Egyptian Current Party), and there is undoubtedly a contradiction between the rhetoric of the organisation around social justice and its economic programme, it is incorrect to describe the MB as a 'reformist' organisation as some on the Left have done. While the MB draws support from all layers of Egyptian society, and this support is fostered through the organisation's apparent anti-imperialist and anti-SCAF rhetoric (although this is frequently overstated), the trajectory of the MB is one of compromise with the counter-revolution.

This assessment has been confirmed by the actions of Morsi and the MB since the Presidential elections. On 2 August 2012, Morsi appointed a new Egyptian cabinet that clearly indicated the continuity between the new regime and Mubarak era. Most of the ministers appointed were close allies of Mubarak or senior level bureaucrats who loyally served the old regime. The position of Defense Minister was retained by the head of SCAF, Field Marshall Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, who has now held the position for 20 years. The new Prime Minister, Hisham Qandil, worked as a senior bureaucrat in the Ministry of Irrigation and Water Resources from 1999 to 2005 and later in the neoliberal African Development Bank. He is well regarded by the military, having been appointed by SCAF to head the Irrigation Ministry last year.

Morsi also appointed Ahmed Gamal Eddin as interior minister. Eddin was deputy interior minister during 2011 and in this position was responsible for much of the repression directed against protestors over the last year. On the day of his appointment, the Arabic language newspaper Al Masry Al Youm reported that Eddin promised to "restore security [as the] highest priority of the Ministry of Interior". He particularly identified protests and demonstrations as "obstacles to achieving security and economic stability" and pledged to punish "citizens who block roads and disable railways" (a common tactic of striking workers). In addition to his record in the repressive apparatus of the state, Eddin is the nephew of the former leader of Mubarak's now dissolved National Democratic Party (NDP) parliamentary bloc.

Morsi's selections for economic portfolios also demonstrated that Egypt's economic policies would not deviate from those of the Mubarak era. The Finance Minister, Mumtaz al-Said, remains unchanged from the previous military-appointed cabinet. Al-Said has been an ardent proponent of neoliberal policies and strongly pushed for international loans from the IMF and World Bank. Indeed, soon after the selection of the cabinet, Said announced that the IMF had been invited to Egypt to pursue discussions over a \$3.2 billion loan. He had earlier presided over a \$200 million loan from the World Bank despite widespread protest. The new Minister of Investment is Osama Saleh, who had been chosen by Mubarak as chairman of Egypt's General Authority for Free Zones and Investment, an institution that led the drive to market Egypt as a low-wage platform for foreign investors. The Minister for Trade and Industry is Hatem Saleh, who is the CEO of Gozour Food Industry Group, a subsidiary of one of the largest private equity companies in the Middle East, Citadel Capital.

These appointments, and the general collaboration of the MB with SCAF over the last period, are a powerful indication of how Islamist politics has emerged as a useful instrument of political elites in the context of the partial disintegration of the old modes of rule. Much like Mubarak's NDP, the organisation possesses a deep penetration across the country, including in rural areas. Its close linkages with important sections of the Egyptian bourgeoisie, its willingness to accommodate with SCAF and with US imperialism (confirmed by its shameful record on Palestine), and its strong connections with regional powers in the Gulf, mean that it presents an attractive model for

restoration of the status quo. This may well generate contradictions with the rhetoric and practices of the organisation but, as with the Turkish AKP, these will likely be easily subordinated to the general interests of administering a capitalist state.

The Revolution Continues

Nevertheless, despite this apparent continuity with the Mubarak era, it would be a grave error to rush to judge Egypt's revolution as aborted or in terminal decline. In many ways, the potential for a renewed deepening of the revolution is more likely today than at any point since Mubarak's downfall. The key reason for such guarded optimism is the growing clarity of the social and class dynamics that have propelled the revolution, and the ongoing mobilizations of workers and other social movements.

Unlike the picture portrayed by the liberal and corporate media, the 2011 uprising was never just about autocracy. While it is clearly true that the millions who took to the streets in January and February 2011 were principally driven (and united) by the desire to remove Mubarak, the outward form of Egypt's autocratic political structure has always been a consequence of a deeper content. Three interrelated factors are key to understanding this content: (1) Egypt's role as a principal ally of US imperialism in the Middle East; (2) the effects of decades of neoliberalism; and (3) the country's particular insertion into the global economy, seen most recently through the impact of the global economic crisis. Capitalism in Egypt is marked by these three factors, which have produced a political economy characterized by massive precarity and polarization of wealth, a political and military elite tightly linked to, and complicit with, the projection of US power in the region, and a country profoundly exposed to the vicissitudes of the world market. Mubarak's dictatorship was a necessary corollary of this political economy. The political and economic features of Egyptian capitalism are completely intertwined. For this reason, any struggle against authoritarianism, if it is to be successful, must unavoidably grow into one that contends with the class nature of Egyptian society.

There are some hopeful signs that this is occurring. Back in September 2011, a wave of militant strikes by teachers, doctors, and workers in public transport, sugar refineries, and the postal sector signalled a deepening struggle by workers that began to link political and economic questions. This wave of strikes was particularly important because it took place across entire industrial sectors unlike an earlier wave of strikes in February that had been more localized to particular workplaces. Some, like the teacher's strike, were nation-wide and encompassed nearly half-a-million workers at its peak. These strikes linked the day-to-day economic interests of workers around wages and conditions with broader social and political questions. Teachers, for example, demanded the resignation of the Minister of Education, more investment in schools and better educational conditions. The doctor's strike raised the question of improved health care and better hospitals. A major theme of the September strike wave was the notion of tathir - the 'cleansing' of public institutions of remnants of the old regime.

This strike wave also highlighted the pernicious role of the MB, with the organisation repeatedly acting to undermine independent worker actions. The teacher's strike eventually collapsed after the MB refused to support ongoing mobilizations and channelled control of the sector back into the old-ETUF affiliated teacher's union. Likewise, among doctors, the MB called off actions through its domination of the doctor's union. Significantly, however, an independent ticket of rank and file activist groups won around quarter of the seats on the General Council of the Doctors Union after the strike - an important challenge to the Brotherhood's monopoly on the union's affairs.

Strikes have continued to grow since that period. In the railway sector, for example, the head of the Egyptian National Railways Authority recently complained of over 870 protests and strikes since the revolution (hence the new Interior Minister's strident call to punish blockage of railway lines). Moreover, since the election of Morsi and the swearing in of the cabinet in early August 2012, a new wave of strikes has erupted. This strike wave includes textile workers, ceramic workers, doctors, university workers, postal workers and health workers from across the entire country. The epicentre of this strike action is the industrial city of Mahalla al-Kubra, where 25,000 textile workers at the state-owned Mahalla Misr Spinning and Weaving Company struck in mid-July. These workers played a leading role in the overthrow of Mubarak, as well as in earlier strike waves of 2006-2008 that helped to delegitimize the Mubarak regime and build new centres of labour militancy.

In response to the latest strike, the MB sent representatives to the factories to convince workers to end the action but these were chased away. One female worker told the Egyptian newspaper, Al-Masry Al-Youm: "The first thing [Morsi] did when he became President is to forget about us. He's only thinking about those earning 200,000 or half a million. He doesn't think about the workers who are bleeding. Where are our rights? We can't even afford a piece of bread." Another worker told the newspaper: "The revolution didn't bring anything to the workers of Misr Spinning in Mahalla ... The workers here are making the revolution once more from the beginning. The coming revolution will be a workers' revolution."

These strikes need to be situated alongside other important social struggles - most significantly the women's movement. A decisive feature of the attempt to restore the status quo is to shutdown women's visibility in the public sphere, removing women as active participants in the frontlines of resistance. In this sense, the MB's (and Salafist movement's) conservative strictures on the role of women are an integral component of broader counter-revolutionary goals. Women (and supportive men) continue to confront these attacks through street demonstrations and other actions that insist on women's right to protest and the public sphere. The position of women is thus a key barometer for the health of the revolutionary process.

These struggles confirm that the electoral victories of the MB and its accommodation with SCAF do not necessarily mean a setback for the revolution; on the contrary, they are an essential part of the process of political clarification. Of course this clarification is not automatic, and one of the principal weaknesses facing the movement is the lack of any unified political vehicle through which to organize, connect and construct future battles. But as the counter-revolutionary forces, united in the Egyptian state and with the support of foreign powers such as the US, attempt to quell the ongoing social struggles at all levels of society, the growth of worker and other movements shows little sign of abating.

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P.S.

* From International Viewpoint. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>

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