

INTERVIEW

# Five years after January 25, 2011: From revolution to reaction in Egypt

Tuesday 26 January 2016, by [NAGUIB Sameh](#), [RUDER Eric](#) (Date first published: 25 January 2016).

January 25 marks the five-year anniversary of the start of the Egyptian Revolution, which began with protests on a national holiday known as Police Day. Eighteen days later, the U.S.-backed dictator Hosni Mubarak was toppled after nearly 30 years in power.

Today, however, a new military regime presides over Egypt, and it is escalating its crackdown on any and all signs of dissent ahead of these and any other dates associated with the revolution. In recent weeks, Egyptian security forces raided some 5,000 homes in central Cairo as a “precautionary measure” against any actions to commemorate the uprising [1]. The regime of Gen. Abdul-Fattah el-Sisi has also imposed restrictions on media outlets and arrested journalists for “publishing false news.” Egypt is now second only to China in the number of journalists in its prisons. Security forces have also arrested and imprisoned a huge number of people on charges of “inciting against state institutions.”

What led to the mass uprising that inspired the world five years ago? How did the forces of counterrevolution re-impose authoritarian rule? What are the prospects for a renewed wave of revolutionary resistance? In this featured interview co-published with Jacobin [2], Sameh Naguib, a leading member of Egypt’s Revolutionary Socialists, spoke with Eric Ruder about the underlying causes of the revolution and what the future holds.

## Socialist Worker

---

**Eric Ruder - WE ARE only a few days away from January 25, which is Police Day in Egypt. Five years ago on this day, activists organized a demonstration, which led to the uprising that became the Egyptian Revolution. What were the underlying causes that led to that outburst on that particular day? How would you explain the economic, social and political factors that paved the way for revolution?**

Same Naguib - IF WE'RE talking about the day itself, one of the main issues involved in the uprising was the question of police brutality and oppression, so that was the link to Police Day. But if you're talking about the revolution in general, there are three different levels of causes. There are long-term historical and structural causes; there are medium-term causes, which have to do with developments during the last decade of Mubarak's rule; and there are what you might call triggers that have to do with why the uprising took place at that particular moment in time.

In terms of long-term structural causes, this is obviously a complicated subject, but to put it briefly, it has to do with the peculiarities of capitalist development in postcolonial Egypt—not simply the

general contradictions of uneven and combined development, but also the shift from the short-lived state capitalist phase of the 1950s and 1960s to the failed attempts to significantly develop the economy through neoliberal reforms. This does not mean that there was no capitalist development, but this development was constantly crisis-ridden and slow.

If you look at what are usually called emerging economies and compare Egypt with countries like Turkey, you find that Egyptian capitalism has performed particularly poorly. So there are structural reasons related to the long-term historical processes of capitalist development in Egypt. In a sense, you could describe Egypt as one of the weakest links in the chain of newly industrialized or “emerging” economies.

Turning to medium-term causes of the revolution during the last 10 years of Mubarak’s rule, there are three main elements. The first was an acceleration of neoliberal reforms from 2004 onwards—in terms of privatization, in terms of the removal of crucial state subsidies for the poor leading to a rapid decline in living standards, and in terms of the removal of all kinds of restrictions on the free movement of capital.

This was embodied by what has been called the businessmen’s government of Ahmed Nazif that started in 2004. On the one hand, there was an unprecedented concentration of wealth and power in the hands of an alliance that included the army and police generals, the ruling party leadership and a group of monopoly capitalists linked to the Mubarak family—and on the other hand, a steep rise in poverty and unemployment.

The second element is the development of a variety of protest movements in Egypt during the last 10 years of Mubarak’s rule. Let’s divide them into political movements and economic movements.

On the political side, there was the movement in support of the Palestinian Intifada of 2000, led by the Muslim Brotherhood on the one hand and the secular opposition on the other. There really were two separate solidarity movements with the second Palestinian Intifada that developed quite rapidly, and for the first time in decades, we saw quite unexpectedly the eruption of a mass mobilization. There were demonstrations by high-school kids, mass demonstrations coming out of the universities, and even some big demonstrations in poor districts in support of the Intifada.

This development energized the whole political spectrum of opposition. So the left had a main solidarity campaign with the Palestinians, and the Islamists, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, were also energized by this. And you not only had demonstrations, but also petition campaigns calling on Mubarak to end diplomatic relations with the Israelis, to open the borders with Gaza, to allow people to get aid into Gaza and so on. That moment was an important turning point in the politicization of large sections of young people in Egypt, something that hadn’t happened since the 1970s on that scale.

Then again in 2003, the same kind of groups and solidarity networks developed in response to the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. There were major demonstrations in nearly every Egyptian city, and at this time, there was also the first serious occupation of Tahrir Square.

The demonstrations began in February, and in March, activists called for people to go to Tahrir Square when the invasion begins. The occupation of Tahrir Square only lasted for two days. But in comparison to what had happened before, it was very serious—some 20,000 to 25,000 people in Tahrir Square. It was the first time that pictures of Mubarak were burned, and people made a direct link between opposition to the U.S. war and opposition to the Mubarak regime.

This moment also marked the emergence of two types of opposition: on the one hand, a left-secular

opposition; and on the other hand, an Islamic opposition, mainly led by the Muslim Brotherhood, that wanted to exert its influence in anti-Mubarak actions. These two wings each contribute to what later becomes a much larger movement.

Then again in 2004, the same players—the radical left and reformist organizations on the one hand, and Islamic organizations on the other—participated in the third stage of the development of political protest movements: the democracy movement. And the democracy movement, because it depended on a very broad alliance of forces, created a kind of united front called Kefaya, which means “enough.”

This united front included Nasserists, liberals, and several left-wing organizations, including the Egyptian Communist Party, the Revolutionary Socialists and others. It also brought together many significant independent figures who signed onto the Kefaya movement—journalists, artists, writers and so on. The Muslim Brotherhood was also represented in the Kefaya movement, but did not take up a very active role in the beginning.

The Kefaya demonstrations in late 2004 had three main demands. The first was that Mubarak would not nominate himself again for elections and that his son would not run for the presidency. The second was to lift Egypt’s emergency laws. And the third was to have free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections. As you can see, these were very basic democratic demands that allowed this broad alliance to take shape.

What was surprising was that despite the fact that the early demonstrations against Mubarak, organized by the Kefaya movement, were very small, the general support on the street was very wide. It resonated so much, in fact, that the Muslim Brotherhood was under extreme pressure to start moving in the same direction. So early in 2005, the Muslim Brotherhood organized mass demonstrations for exactly the same democratic demands. They were able to organize much bigger demonstrations, both inside the university campuses and on the streets.

It was the first time in years that the Muslim Brotherhood organized demonstrations, for example, in Ramses Square, half a kilometer from Tahrir Square, where they mobilized more than 7,000 Muslim Brotherhood activists. There were mass arrests of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2005, and though there were also severe restrictions on Kefaya, it was nothing like the level of repression that the Muslim Brotherhood faced during that period.

Then in 2006, the largest wave of workers’ strikes in modern Egyptian history took place, starting with a major strike involving 24,000 workers in El-Mahalla El-Kubra, a city known for its massive textile industry. In 2007, the strike wave spread to nearly every single industry, including the service sector, the entire public sector, and even spreading to doctors, professionals and nurses.

This was not completely unrelated to the fact that there was a significant political movement in the preceding years, but not directly linked to this movement, nor organized by those who were mobilizing the political demonstrations. For the radical left, the question became how to try to link this emerging workers’ movement with the democratic political demands that were starting to get a wider audience. And this remained a central question.

The other central question that emerged was how to deal with the Muslim Brotherhood. You have an Islamist movement that for its own reasons needs to fight for democratic rights (at that point at least), needs to end the emergency laws, obviously needs to free political prisoners (because most of them were Muslim Brotherhood), needs to have more political space—and therefore has an obvious interest in being part of a movement that increases democratic rights in Egypt and reduces the extreme repression of the Mubarak regime. And you have a secular movement, mainly of the left in

general, that is starting to have an audience, that is starting to have an effect, but that is clearly distinct from the Muslim Brotherhood-organized movements.

At this point, a very significant division on the left emerges about how to deal with the role played by the Muslim Brotherhood in building opposition to Mubarak. It's a division that continues to the present day.

In 2007 and 2008, the presence of the Muslim Brotherhood in these movements became a central question. They were on the streets, they were on the campuses, they were in the poor neighborhoods—wherever people were trying to organize, wherever left forces were trying to organize, they were there. They were the biggest—and continue to be the biggest—mass organization in opposition in the country.

One part of the left took the position that the Brotherhood is actually worse than the Mubarak regime—that they would create an even worse form of dictatorship, namely a theocratic religious state. Some people on the left even used the analysis of fascism to try to understand that movement. And therefore, part of the left quite early on allied itself with the Mubarak regime—or at least reduced its willingness to seriously oppose the Mubarak regime—because of the fear of the Islamists coming to power.

Another part of the left said that we must oppose Mubarak, that we want to participate in the democratic movement against Mubarak as an independent alternative, but we have to fight the Brotherhood as we fight the Mubarak regime. In other words, the Mubarak regime and the Muslim Brotherhood are equal enemies for the left, and they have to be fought simultaneously.

After the revolution and even after the counterrevolution and coup, this idea again emerged, stressing that the Sisi regime and the Muslim Brotherhood are two wings of the counterrevolution. Later, I'll come back to some of the problems with this idea, which enjoys some popularity on the radical left.

One of the very important realizations that took root in the mid-2000s was the sense that we need joint action, some way to unite those movements grouped under an Islamic banner with movements that are secular, but a kind of unity that preserves the independence of the left. In this way, the left can unite with these broader forces, while retaining its ability to be critical of the Muslim Brotherhood—whether it's their reactionary position on women, their reactionary position on the Christian minority, or their continuing adherence to neoliberalism.

In practical terms, we had to answer the question of what position the left should have if, for example, there's a demonstration against emergency laws led by Muslim Brotherhood youth in the university. Should the left participate in such a demonstration? Should the left refuse to participate in such a demonstration? Do you call for a separate demonstration off to the side? What do you do? So the question of how to relate to the Brotherhood was always more a practical question in the fight against the Mubarak regime.

Two important developments also took place in the workers' movement as a consequence of the increase in class struggle. One was the emergence of the beginning of independent trade unions, which had been completely controlled by the state since Nasser nationalized them and outlawed independent unions. With the massive strike wave in 2006 and 2007, the first important development was the beginnings of strike committees growing into the early stages of an independent trade union movement. That was a historically significant shift in the workers movement.

The second very important development was that textile workers in Mahalla tried to organize a general strike on April 6, 2008, but state repression turned the event into a massive anti-Mubarak protest.

On the morning of April 6, security forces broke into the factory and occupied it before the workers were able to. The police attempted to compel workers to run the machines and to escort them out of the factory at the end of the day in order to stop mass protests from developing. But the repression provoked a huge explosion of protests throughout the town of Mahalla, which is an industrial city of about half a million people.

The protests involved all sectors of the population—workers, elementary school kids, high school students, women—and it turned into the biggest demonstration the town had seen in decades. Billboards of Mubarak were burned down, several government buildings were attacked, police cars were set on fire, several people were shot, and there were major confrontations.

Eventually, the movement in Mahalla was surrounded and crushed, but it was a sign of things to come. It was a rehearsal for what would happen three years later. And you can see here the economic and the political dimensions starting to merge—the attempts at a strike that had purely economic demands turning into an anti-Mubarak mass demonstration.

There were always these two sides to the movement against Mubarak. They were not separate. That's why one of the biggest youth movements that developed during the last years of Mubarak's rule called itself the April 6 Youth Movement, which was the date of the main Mahalla strike in 2008.

Finally, to return to the three levels of causes of the Egyptian Revolution, we've already covered long- and medium-term causes, and we're now at the third level: the short-term triggers. There were three main triggers.

The first was the 2010 elections. In the 2005 elections, 88 Muslim Brotherhood candidates won seats out of what were then around 400 seats in parliament. In the 2010 elections, there was literally no opposition at all. Not a single seat was won by the Brotherhood. The election was totally rigged, controlled by the police completely.

There were three rounds in the 2010 elections. In the first round, the Brotherhood ran candidates, but the police surrounded all the polling stations and only allowed people with National Democratic Party cards or who were known to the police to enter. In response, the Brotherhood boycotted the second and third rounds. As a result, there was a parliament with a few independents, but more than 95 percent of legislators were members of Mubarak's National Democratic Party.

Of course, this produces an enormous contradiction: The government is moving towards further repression in an attempt to "nationalize" all political space, but at the same time, there's the emergence and growth of an increasingly vocal democratic movement on the one hand, and a workers' movement on the other.

The second main trigger was the Tunisian Revolution. The 2010 elections were held in November, and in December, a massive mobilization of Tunisian people began that would topple the U.S.-backed dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali from power.

The third trigger was the torture, beating and murder of a young blogger in Alexandria named Khaled Said. Said's death sparked a movement of sorts around the Facebook page "We Are All Khaled Said" as well as street protests in Alexandria, and his murder became emblematic of the brutality, police repression and corruption of the Mubarak regime.

**THIS IS a good transition to the next question, because in the West, there's a widespread understanding of the Egyptian Revolution as a youth movement in which Twitter and Facebook were essential to the ouster of Mubarak. But whatever the role of social media, it's only one part of an explanation. Could you talk about the other social forces, in addition to the youth, that were critical to Mubarak's overthrow?**

IT'S IMPORTANT to periodize events in the early days of the revolution. The January 25 protest on Police Day was called for by a wide coalition of forces, which incidentally did not include the Muslim Brotherhood and did not include the legal left in Egypt, such as the Tagammu' Party and the Communist Party. The main forces calling for the January 25 action were those involved with Kefaya, the revolutionary left together with the April 6 Youth Movement and similar groups.

So it was the usual suspects who called for protests on January 25, but what happened that day went far beyond these forces. You could say that, yes, the youth movements, the people who were active on Facebook, played an important role via social media in getting the message out to a wide layer of people. But the events themselves, what unfolded on the day and the days that followed, had very little to do with what you would call Facebook activists and Facebook youth—or, if you want to take the Western media narrative further, had very little to do with middle-class, educated youth.

On Police Day, activists in several agreed-upon areas around the city started demonstrations. In each of those places, there was a heavy police presence, because it wasn't a secret that people were planning to protest. But these starting points were in popular, mainly working-class neighborhoods, and for the first time, the activists were rapidly joined by an outburst of people—men, women, children, everybody—which overwhelmed the police.

The police expected the protests to be just another event organized by activist groups. One of the things that made the police not mobilize to the full extent on January 25 was the fact that forces like the Muslim Brotherhood were against the protest. Also opposed were the Christian Coptic Church and legal left as well.

So the police tried to mobilize just enough force to stop the protests from drawing in anyone beyond the usual activist circles. But what surprised everyone was the reaction of ordinary, mainly working-class residents of the popular and poor neighborhoods around Cairo, who came in the thousands and very rapidly overwhelmed the police and started moving towards Tahrir Square.

It makes sense from the longer-term perspective discussed above of developing and widening movements challenging Mubarak—whether economically in the factories or politically on the streets and in demonstrations. And there was the electrifying effect of the Tunisian Revolution and the fall of Ben Ali. So in retrospect, it's not that strange that people would feel confident enough to seriously believe that it is possible to start moving in a bold way against the Mubarak regime.

On January 28, which was a much bigger day in terms of the scale of mobilization and the numbers of people involved. There were even more serious confrontations with the police and another qualitative transformation.

On the one hand, the Muslim Brotherhood decided to join in and mobilize on a very wide scale for the January 28 demonstration. On the other hand, you had serious mistakes committed by the Mubarak regime, such as shutting down Internet connections and mobile networks. This literally forced people to go into the streets, since this was the only place it was possible to figure out what was happening. This was a very stupid and panicky reaction that ultimately proved fatal—because the numbers on the streets suddenly swelled dramatically when people did not know what was happening.

With a massive swelling of crowds in the streets, confrontations with the police were far more violent and serious than on January 25. As a result, more than 100 police stations are burned down; thousands of police cars and vehicles are set on fire; the main National Democratic Party headquarters in various cities, including Cairo, were burned down; various local government buildings were burned down; and there was the complete disintegration of the police force.

The complete disintegration of the police force in what was for a very long time a police state was an event of enormous magnitude in terms of how it affected people's consciousness. It was impossible for a known police officer to walk down the street because he would be attacked immediately. They all had to get rid of their uniforms and go into hiding. And for the first time, you had a city like Cairo, which was the center of all these events, with no police at all. That had a hugely liberating effect on people.

Developments proceeded in two directions. First, because on January 28, people were able to break through police lines and gather at Tahrir Square, people decided not to leave the square until their demands were met, and these demands took shape very quickly.

The demands on January 25 focused on ending police repression, a call for the firing of the interior minister who oversees the police, and a few general democratic demands—nothing about overthrowing the regime or Mubarak leaving. The general slogan was that the people wanted to overthrow the regime, but it was still not clear how far that would go. In the detailed demands, it was mainly that the interior minister be removed and put on trial.

But from January 28 onward, the demands themselves became more radical and more sweeping, centering, of course, on Mubarak but going even beyond that. People began to advance very general demands, like freedom, dignity, equality, social justice and so on.

On the surface, these were vague demands, but in the context of the movements developing during the last decade of Mubarak's rule, they were not that vague—they were part of a whole set of demands, an explosion of demands of all kinds, that concentrated on Mubarak and the regime, but were much deeper than simple demands for what might be called a mere "democratic transition."

## **WHAT ABOUT the role of the workers' movement in toppling Mubarak?**

AT THIS point, there were now literally more than 2 million people occupying Tahrir Square—but not just Tahrir. These occupations of central squares were happening in cities all over the country. And it was mainly working-class people who were on the barricades protecting the various occupations and facing down continuous attempts by the regime, and in particular, military intelligence forces, to break these movements.

We know this as a result of detailed statistics about people who died on the barricades. Over 75 percent of those who died in the first 18 days of the uprising were working-class youth. They were not Facebook activists or "middle class" in any sense. Of course, for a Marxist, this would make a lot of sense. The people who fight on barricades would not generally be middle-class people.

A few days later, on February 2, you had what becomes known as the Battle of the Camels, when the regime sent armed thugs, using live ammunition and mounted on camels, to attempt to break into Tahrir Square and drive people away. This attack was defeated by a joint effort of working-class youth on the one hand and the far more organized Muslim Brotherhood youth on the other hand. These two elements played a central role in protecting Tahrir from the attempts by the regime to break the occupation, but still the regime did not fold.

The regime now tried to ignore what was happening in Tahrir while attempting to "restart" the

country—to get the economy moving again, while proposing a long process of “negotiations” with people occupying Tahrir.

Meanwhile, the regime sought to use its control of the media to wage an ideological campaign against what was happening in Tahrir, using the same language continuously deployed by Sisi today. The regime claimed, for example, that the protests were a conspiracy organized by Palestinians from the Hamas movement, that the protesters were armed, that they were getting money from the Americans—they would say whatever they thought would serve to isolate people in Tahrir.

What made that impossible was that from February 6—the day they tried to get Cairo working again—the workers in key public-sector and civil service occupations, such as railway workers and bus drivers, went out on strike. So their attempt to get these economic centers working again backfired, sparking a strike wave similar to, but actually much bigger, than the strike wave that took place in 2007 and 2008.

The strikes were obviously in support of Tahrir. It didn’t mean thousands and thousands of workers were coming from their factories to Tahrir Square, but the strike wave was clearly related to what was happening in Tahrir. By striking, these workers refused to save the regime—by refusing to get the buses working, refusing to get the trains working, refusing to get the banks working. And it was that strike wave that convinced the army generals that it was over—that it was possible that they could lose all control if they didn’t do something quickly, such as make a serious concession.

This moment was a perfect illustration of what Rosa Luxemburg argues in her famous book *The Mass Strike* about the resonance between the workers’ movement and the political movement, between politics and economics. The point is that the movements aren’t identical, but they resonate with one another.

The strike wave didn’t mean that suddenly the workers were leading the revolution. That wasn’t the case, but what was happening in terms of political demands issuing from central squares in cities across Egypt was resonating in the factories and workplaces. And the reverse was also happening: the strike wave gave more confidence to people in the squares—in particular, in Tahrir—to be more resilient, to push further against Mubarak.

And when Mubarak made his last speech and announced he was not going to resign, people started marching in the tens of thousands towards the presidential palace with the open and clear aim of occupying the presidential palace. It was then that the head of the intelligence services comes out and says that it’s over, Mubarak is out, Mubarak is leaving the presidency.

So the workers did not lead the revolution against Mubarak, but their waves of strikes, first of all, saved the movement of the squares, and secondly, was ultimately the main cause behind the army’s decision to get rid of Mubarak.

**FROM THE moment that the military tossed out Mubarak, the whole point was to use his ouster as a concession in the hopes of bringing the mass mobilization in Tahrir Square under control and blunt and contain it. Immediately, the forces of counterrevolution began strategizing about the steps necessary to do so. Can you talk about the various sources of the counterrevolution, and what their means and goals were?**

YES, THE leadership of the military decides to remove Mubarak as a concession to the movement, which is a common response by ruling classes in all revolutions. The state doesn’t suddenly disintegrate in the face of a revolution. The old regime starts searching for people in the moderate middle who might be able to carry out a controlled transition that preserves the state intact.



It was at this point that the Muslim Brotherhood's role becomes crucial in quite the classical reformist sense. The Muslim Brotherhood, of course, was never a revolutionary party. They were dragged into this revolution against Mubarak during the 18 days because of the participation of their youth and because of their fear of losing their wider mass base that became involved in that movement. So they were dragged into this revolution, but they were never a revolutionary movement.

Once the army made the concession by dumping Mubarak, the Brotherhood was very happy to proclaim that the fight was over and to start an organized transition to "democracy." They wanted to negotiate with the old regime, to negotiate with the army, and to preserve social stability as much as possible.

The Muslim Brotherhood now starts defending the army, including the top brass that removed Mubarak, and they strike a deal with them. The deal was that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) would allow the Muslim Brotherhood to organize a political party, to become a major player in parliament, and to even allow the Muslim Brotherhood to be part of the government—if the Muslim Brotherhood helped SCAF control the situation on the streets and in the workplaces.

So the Muslim Brotherhood entered into an alliance with SCAF against what continued to be a developing movement on the streets. This is a crucial issue because people sometimes call the concession made by SCAF to remove Mubarak on February 11 a "coup"—comparing it to Sisi's removal of the Muslim Brotherhood's President Mohammed Morsi from power in 2013. I think that is a superficial and inaccurate comparison.

The 2011 removal of Mubarak and SCAF's taking over the reins of power was an actual concession—a concession in the face of an unprecedented mass mobilization against the Mubarak regime, against the police, against everything that the old regime represented.

It was the beginning of several concessions. For example, in the beginning, Mubarak was not put on trial. He and his family were taken by helicopter to his home in Sharm el-Sheikh, and it took several occupations and demonstrations in Tahrir Square by hundreds of thousands to compel SCAF to put Mubarak on trial, formally speaking. The demonstrations in Tahrir Square continued after Mubarak was deposed on February 11, and the strike waves continued after the February 11 event, in a way opening the door for more mobilizations.

At the beginning, there was confusion among most forces involved in the revolution about the role of the army. The army played its cards very intelligently. They claimed neutrality and said that if the people wanted to get rid of Mubarak, they would remove Mubarak. They insisted that the army was basically neutral, that the army is the Egyptian people's army, and that the army will not fight the Egyptian people.

Obviously, the army was indeed fighting the Egyptian people—because military intelligence forces were already torturing and killing people, even kidnapping people from Tahrir Square. This was from the very beginning. The Egyptian army actually moved its tanks away from the entrances to Tahrir Square to allow thugs to enter the square in early February. The army only started to make serious concessions because of the pressure from below.

The Muslim Brotherhood entered an alliance with SCAF on the assumption that they would be able to pacify the streets and push people towards a procedural, "democratic" process. That didn't really work. The demonstrations continued, the occupations continued, and the strikes continued. But because the Muslim Brotherhood was the largest mass organization, it was able to start a kind of parallel procedural democratic process.

First, there was the referendum on the constitution—a constitution, by the way, that completely protected the powers of the military in Egypt and differed very little in terms of substance from the previous constitution. They were able to push that through and win over a majority.

What happens in these types of situations is that people become politicized, but they don't immediately move from being nonpolitical to being revolutionary. People look around for those forces that serve as the opposition, and in this case, that was the Muslim Brotherhood.

So people decide to try on the Brotherhood for size. The Brotherhood says they're against corruption, they're more democratic, they'll get rid of the old regime and the old ruling party. What's more, the Muslim Brotherhood had been active for years, and many of them had been to jail and made many sacrifices. So they seemed to be, for large sections of the population, the alternative to the old regime.

In all revolutions, in the early stages of the revolution, people first try the reformists. In France, it was the constitutional monarchists who had the majority in the beginning. In Russia, it was the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries who had majority in the beginning, even in the soviets. In Egypt, it was the only comparable mass organization, the Muslim Brotherhood.

Now when I say comparable mass organization, I don't mean that the Muslim Brotherhood is a reformist organization in any social democratic sense of the term. The Muslim Brotherhood doesn't have its roots in the workers' movement or in the trade union bureaucracy. But in the absence of a traditional social democratic movement, it filled that space. For a wide sector of the population, it was the first kind of seemingly reformist movement that comes to mind when thinking of a viable alternative to the status quo.

So there were elections for parliament at the end of 2011 and in 2012, and the Muslim Brotherhood gained a majority, together with the Salafists. The Salafists had deep roots in several important areas, particularly in Alexandria, in some of the delta governorates, and in the south of Egypt. But the Muslim Brotherhood alone—as would be expected as the only organized mass opposition force in the country—would be the first force to succeed in electoral terms.

It's important when discussing counterrevolution to understand what exactly we are talking about. The role played by the Muslim Brotherhood towards the Egyptian revolution was one of betrayal—a classical betrayal by a reformist non-revolutionary movement. It attempted to broker a deal with the old regime to get a place at the table and to share power with the old regime. Yet it failed to do so.

The Muslim Brotherhood was not a central part of the counterrevolution. You could say that it was understandably the first beneficiary of the revolution, in the sense that it was the first freely elected political force that came to power—in formal terms, at least—in the wake of the revolution. But it was also the first victim of the counterrevolution. It's important to understand this because some people blithely talk about “two wings” of the counterrevolution—the Muslim Brotherhood being the religious wing and the army being the military wing—as if this was a fight between two sides of a counterrevolution.

This is an extremely reductionist view of the process of revolution and counterrevolution. People did not go out and vote in the millions for the Muslim Brotherhood because they were voting for a counterrevolution. No, they voted for the Muslim Brotherhood to carry out the demands of the revolution. It was only when the Muslim Brotherhood betrayed the revolution that we begin to see a movement against the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Brotherhood lost support because: one, it generally continued the policies of the Mubarak

regime, particularly neoliberalism; two, it refused to carry out any serious investigations into the role of the military in Egypt in the violence during the revolutionary upsurge; three, it refused to try the police brass for their role in the deaths of Egyptian revolutionaries; and four, it refused to change Egyptian foreign policy with respect to the U.S. and Israel.

All of this produced a radicalization that led to a movement in 2012 and 2013 against the Muslim Brotherhood and the presidency of Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood candidate elected in June 2012.

But again, it's important to understand that there were two types of opposition to the Morsi regime. The first was an opposition that wanted to continue the 2011 revolution by either forcing the Muslim Brotherhood to carry out the demands of the revolution or by removing the Muslim Brotherhood from power, as it did the Mubarak regime, and replacing it with a more representative political force that would actually reflect the demands of the revolution. This was the left-wing opposition to the Morsi regime.

But there was also a right-wing opposition to the Morsi regime organized by the remnants of the old regime, who were joined by liberals, leftists and nationalists who were part of the revolution in early 2011, but, as I mentioned earlier, saw the Muslim Brotherhood in power as a bigger threat than the return of the old regime. So they didn't mind aligning themselves with the old regime against the Muslim Brotherhood. They didn't even mind when the military began openly speaking of intervening against the Morsi regime.

That is why the events in mid-2013 were so confusing. On June 30, 2013, millions all across Egypt marched against Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. Days later, on July 3, 2013, the military swept Morsi from power and again installed its generals at the head of the state.

These events were confusing because a section of demonstrators represented those pushing for a radicalization of the revolution. People were realizing the limits of the Muslim Brotherhood, realizing that the Muslim Brotherhood was just becoming a buffer to protect the regime. People wanted to remove that buffer and continue the struggle against the old regime. But here, we need to be careful about the term "people," because unfortunately, that was not what all the people who mobilized on June 30 wanted.

The old regime, particularly the military and security apparatuses, used the crisis and the paralysis of the Muslim Brotherhood in power to begin what turned out to be the real counterrevolution. They sought to mobilize large sections of the middle class in Egypt around the idea that both the revolution and the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood could only result in anarchy and instability, and thus that it's crucial to return to security and stability—after all, we don't want to end up like Syria or Iraq or Libya.

This was a central argument in the mobilization against Morsi from the right. This paved the way for Sisi to come to power, and it was how it was possible to generate the coup against Morsi and start a process of counterrevolution far surpassing anything we've seen so far in terms of repression and violence.

We should understand revolution as a process, but the word process can be confusing because revolution is both a process and a set of events, or really an "ensemble of events." So the 18 days of protest between January 25 and the fall of Mubarak on February 11 are central events in the Egyptian Revolution, but they also represent the start of a process.

The same thing applies to the counterrevolution. It involves events, such as the June 30 mass

marches and July 3 coup d'état, but it also starts another process or "ensemble of events" in the opposite direction to the revolution. The first victim of this counterrevolution was the Muslim Brotherhood.

So it doesn't make much sense to talk about two sides of a counterrevolution fighting each other. To illustrate the point, what would you call the left and the Nasserists and the other forces that aligned themselves with Sisi, that supported the July 3 coup, that supported the massacres, that supported the anti-protest laws and other repressive laws proposed by Sisi, and that continue to support the regime today? Wouldn't they be counterrevolutionary as well? If so, what does that leave us with? That leaves us with three wings to this counterrevolution!

And it leads to an argument that Engels talked about—the idea of one reactionary mass on the one hand and a hypothetical revolutionary force, a kind of pure revolutionary force, on the other. The world doesn't work that way, and Egypt definitely doesn't work that way. Things are much more complicated. The Muslim Brotherhood is a much more contradictory and complicated movement.

The forces of revolution and counterrevolution—and understanding these two processes and the struggle that was and continues to be carried out in Egypt—is much more complicated than these oversimplifications.

Two more important points to make: One, the coup of 2013 was an attack on the revolution—it's a clear step in the direction of the counterrevolution we've been witnessing for the last two years. The takeover of power, the coup that took place in 2011, was a defensive move, was a move backwards, was a concession to a rising movement. This difference is extremely important, because many people confused the mass mobilizations that led to the fall of Morsi with the mass mobilizations that led to the fall of Mubarak.

It's important to note that the biggest demonstrations on June 30, 2013, included policemen in full uniform, included military men in full uniform, included army helicopters with Egyptian flags "protecting" people on the marches, with nationalist anthems and songs being sung. Not a single policeman was attacked, not a single army person was attacked, not a single state institution was attacked—this was not a revolutionary mobilization.

The June 30 mobilization, as I mentioned, included both a left- and a right-wing opposition, but the main thrust of the mobilization was—and this is especially clear now in hindsight—was quite the opposite of the 18 days of protest that led to the fall of Mubarak.

**IN RETROSPECT, do you think it was a mistake to organize opposition to Morsi at that time?**

NO, THERE *had* to be a movement against Morsi. Morsi had to be exposed for what he was. Morsi *did* protect the old regime, Morsi *did* protect the leadership of the military, Morsi *did* carry out the same neoliberal policies of Mubarak. Morsi did not implement a single demand or achieve a single goal of the revolution. Morsi didn't even carry out any of his own promises, let alone the demands of the revolution.

So a movement against Morsi and the remnants of the old regime—against Morsi and the military leadership—had to be carried out. The Revolutionary Socialists of Egypt opposed the Muslim Brotherhood from day one, from February 12, 2011, when they said that they would make a deal with SCAF.

Oddly enough, some of the Nasserists and leftists who are now the most vocal supporters of Sisi and the most extreme in opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood are the same people who went into an

electoral alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood during the 2011 parliamentary elections. We refused to have any alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood, and I still think it was right for us to be part of the movement against Morsi.

But it is important to note that what we tried to do was to have a movement that was independent of the clearly counterrevolutionary mobilization that was openly being organized by figures from the old regime and the heads of the intelligence services. The problem was that the two things were happening at the same time.

The problem was that the radical left underestimated the ability of the counterrevolution and the generals to mobilize through the media—owned and controlled by the big businessmen of the Mubarak era. Through this campaign of fear—such as comparing Egypt to Syria, or sabotaging particular services (such as electricity) to create a climate of insecurity, particularly among sectors of the middle classes—the forces of counterrevolution were able to get traction.

Let me just give you one example of how complicated this was. During the revolution against Mubarak, Coptic Christian youth played a central role, and it was one of the factors that gave the revolution—and the Tahrir occupation in particular—a secular and very democratic spirit. This made it impossible for any Islamic movement to attempt to “hegemonize” the movement—there were too many Copts involved for it to turn it into some kind of Islamic movement.

But the other side also sought to use the Coptic issue. By playing up justified fears of Coptic oppression at the hands of the Brotherhood, the counterrevolution and the military sought to mobilize Copts against the Muslim Brotherhood and, after that, against the revolution itself.

This same dynamic played out around the issue of women. Women played a central role in the 2011 revolution. We saw the biggest mass demonstrations by women ever in Egyptian history against sexual harassment and against discrimination. Women played a central part in all the main strikes and occupations, but again, the question of women was used by those mobilizing against Morsi in 2013 and later by the Sisi regime itself—not only against the Muslim Brotherhood, but against the revolution itself.

This is similar to the way in which some anti-feminist writers use feminist language against women’s demands—such as the idea of putting forward family life and other conservative ideas cloaked in the language of women’s liberation. It’s an example of the counterrevolution learning from and deploying the language of revolution against itself.

That’s precisely what Sisi did during the Morsi period. For example, during the Egyptian revolution, the Egyptian flag was taken over by people on the revolutionary side, and it became a symbol of the revolution itself. But it was very easy, because of the vagueness of the symbol, for the counterrevolution to reclaim it for its side.

The women’s question was used tremendously by the counterrevolution against the revolution. I’ll tell you how. They didn’t only use the women’s question by saying that the Muslim Brotherhood is reactionary, will force women to wear the veil, stop them from working and so on. They also talked about women being virtuous, women opposing anarchy, women saving the family, women saving the nation, women who aren’t like the “loose” women who protested in the streets or who allowed their daughters out on the streets.

The Sisi regime is far more conservative in practice than the Morsi presidency was or tried to be. There is absolutely nothing that is secular or progressive about the Sisi regime. His counterrevolutionary mobilization is based on fear, conservatism, patriarchy, national chauvinism

and sectarian politics.

## **HOW DOES the Egyptian Revolution fit into the wider regional and global context, economically and politically speaking?**

SOME PEOPLE dispute whether the Egyptian Revolution is related to what is happening economically and politically on a global scale, but it is no coincidence that the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions took place in 2011—both are related to the world economic crisis of 2008.

This wasn't the only element that drove these revolutions, but it definitely played an important role. The volatility in consumer prices, the decline in tourism, the decline in foreign investment, the volatility of energy prices—these changes emerged from the 2008 crisis and played their role, particularly the sharp rise and volatility of basic commodity prices. This made it impossible for the ruling class—with its neoliberal policies—to continue as usual. So it was definitely one of the preconditions of this revolution.

It's also crucial to understand what happened in Egypt in the broader context, and not just in terms of the Arab revolutions. Without the broader context, events in Egypt can be portrayed as part of an exclusively Arab phenomenon. But the economic crisis gripped Egypt just as it gripped the whole of southern Europe, and just as a huge movement sprung up in Egypt and Tunisia, so there were also huge movements springing up in Europe.

An unprecedented wave of mass strikes took place in Greece in 2010. You can't say that there was, on one side of the Mediterranean, some of the biggest general strikes in modern history, and that this was completely unrelated to a series of mass revolutions on the other side of the Mediterranean. They are obviously linked, and they are obviously linked to what is happening on a global scale.

Regionally, it's crucial to point out the role of the Saudi regime and its allies, which are the main centers of counterrevolution in the region. Saudi Arabia and Kuwaiti and Emirati capital are an essential part of Egyptian capitalism. They are the main foreign investors in the Egyptian economy and have been since the 1970s. So they have a lot at stake—directly—in Egypt.

It is important also to note that Saudi Arabia and the Emirates were and continue to be the main financial backers of the Sisi regime. There's no way the Sisi regime could have survived until now without massive financial support from Saudi Arabia and the Emirates.

It is also important to understand the extent to which the 2011 revolutions, and the repercussions of the 2011 revolutions, have shaken countries like Saudi Arabia. In recent days, 47 political opponents of the regime were executed. At the top of that list is Nimr al-Nimr, who was the leader of the Shiite movement in the eastern part of the Saudi Arabia. Al-Nimr organized mass demonstrations, inspired by the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, against the Saudi monarchy.

It's important to understand the links between these events. The support of Saudi Arabia for Sisi and the counterrevolution is part of a wider role that the Saudi monarchy is playing, and it shows the extent to which the next Egyptian revolution must tackle not only the regime in power in Egypt, but also its main Gulf backers.

And this leads us to the role of the U.S., which has been a crucial ally of Egyptian rulers since the time of Sadat in the 1970s. The U.S. was a major financial and military backer of the Mubarak regime and now the Sisi regime.

Sometimes, people speak as if the U.S. somehow would have preferred the Muslim Brotherhood to have stayed in power and isn't really supporting Sisi. Of course, the U.S. finds it difficult to openly

support Sisi because he's such an obviously dictatorial figure, who took power in a military coup. But in actual fact, there is no way Saudi Arabia could have paid and financed the Egyptian counterrevolution without U.S. approval.

And if the U.S. had wanted to stop the Sisi regime at any point, it could have easily done that by means of its vast economic and military influence in Egypt. But the U.S. continues to arm the Sisi regime and continues to send it \$1.3 billion a year. The Egyptian government is now in negotiations with the IMF and the World Bank regarding a new round of loans. And the European Union continues to support and invite Sisi to talks of various sorts.

So Sisi has military deals with the U.S., France, Britain and Germany. It's similar to the West's relationship with China: They claim to care about human rights in Egypt, but say that "engagement" is the best policy to improve the human rights situation. But in actual fact, they openly support Egypt's military dictatorship.

### **GIVEN THE situation you describe, what are the tasks of the left in Egypt today?**

FIRST, IT'S important to be clear that the process of counterrevolution is ongoing since the coup on July 3, 2013.

The level of repression is *much* worse than it was under the Mubarak regime. More than 3,000 people have been killed, hundreds have disappeared, and more than 50,000 political prisoners are languishing in jail. The judiciary has become an open tool in the hands of the military regime, and the number of death sentences and life sentences handed out to political opponents of the regime are on a scale that the Mubarak regime would never have dreamed of.

This makes sense given that the forces of counterrevolution understand the need to break the spirit of the revolution, to shatter the confidence gained by the people of Egypt in 2011. That spirit hasn't been broken yet, and that's why we see these very high levels of repression.

The extent to which they are scared by the fifth anniversary of the revolution is remarkable. Across Cairo and in all the other major Egyptian cities, the military has positioned tanks and armored cars and arrested activists of all sorts in order to make sure that no serious demonstrations take place on January 25, 2016. They want to create a climate of fear and intimidation. These are not the actions of a self-confident regime, now more than two years after the coup. It is still in no sense stable or confident of its own rule.

There are several things for us to be optimistic about. The first is that the regime has had to go back to its old ways. For example, the parliament that has just been elected is mainly made up of either old members of the National Democratic Party, former generals from the army or the internal security forces, or Mubarak-era capitalists. There is no opposition in the current parliament. There is no liberal or left opposition and absolutely no Islamic opposition. Given the regime's narrow base of support, it remains quite unstable—which is why the 2011 revolution was successful in the first place.

Secondly, despite all the attacks, the spirit of resistance among workers has not been crushed. We've seen a new wave of strikes in the last two months, involving textile workers in the delta, workers in subsidiary companies of the Suez Canal, cement workers, civil servants, and graduate students.

So on the one hand, there's a revival of the workers' movement, and on the other hand, a degree of panic on their side. Nothing has changed in terms of economic policy. On the contrary, the neoliberal policies of the Mubarak era have been deepened and accelerated. So on the economic

plane, there's a retrenchment of neoliberalism, and on the political plane, the ramping up of repression. And the radicalization of hundreds of thousands of mainly working-class young people still has yet to be uprooted.

Let me give just one anecdotal example: Soccer fans—particularly young, working-class people—in Egypt were a major force in the revolution. The “ultras,” as they're known, are associated with the left, unlike in Europe where they are usually associated with the right wing and racism. In Egypt, the ultras are known for their anti-police and anti-oppression stance—and now for their role in the Egyptian revolution.

Since Sisi came to power, there hasn't been a single soccer match where fans were allowed to enter the stadium. All soccer matches—which in Egypt is the most popular sport—are played in completely empty stadiums. Only the police are allowed in. That shows you that this is not a regime that is stable.

Right now, there's an ongoing strike movement as well as active youth groups, all of whom represent a huge threat to the regime. And now we're looking at a series of five-year anniversaries—January 25 is an important day soon to be followed by February 11. Then there will be April 6, June 30 and July 3. On August 14, there were the massacres in Rabaa Square and Nahda Square. And November 19 marks the beginning of what is known as the second wave of the Egyptian revolution. October 9 is when Coptic Christians were massacred in front of the main television building.

On all these anniversaries, the police and the army will likely be mobilized on a massive scale to prevent anybody from even thinking about having a demonstration. In a sense, the regime is haunted by both dates and places—the dates of the events and the spaces where the events took place.

But this is not a situation that is sustainable. And it has to be pointed out that the dramatic fall in oil prices—not to mention the emerging economic crisis in Saudi Arabia and the barbarism of Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen—means that the steady financing by Saudi Arabia and the Emirates of the Sisi regime cannot continue at the same pace and on the same scale as before.

All this means that there are opportunities to start building for a new revolutionary wave. Young people politicized by the Egyptian revolution in 2011 at age 20 are 25 now. Their experience of the revolution has not evaporated. It would require a level of repression that Sisi is incapable of to completely eradicate that experience. The question for the revolutionary left is how to build on this consciousness, how to plan for the next round of revolutionary struggle.

A crucial aspect of this question is how the left should relate to the Islamist movement. Specifically, how should the left relate to the Islamic movement's ongoing opposition to Sisi's military dictatorship? What should be done to avoid the mistakes made during the 2011 revolution? How can the left create an independent, radical left that is capable of winning a mass base independent of the Muslim Brotherhood, but that is capable of competing with the Muslim Brotherhood for the support of the masses?

One of the strangest aspects of the period of the Egyptian counterrevolution is that a majority of leftists did one of two things. One current on the left allied itself with the Sisi regime because they see it as at least a kind of secular “enlightened despotism” that can prevent Egypt from becoming a theocratic regime. This includes famous left-wing novelists, poets, actors, and political activists—including *seasoned* ex-socialist activists—who are now 100 percent in support of Sisi.

Another current on the left is against Sisi, but also argues for opposing the Muslim Brotherhood at the same time. What does that mean in practice? On an abstract level, this makes sense: we need to



be against both forces. But what does it mean in practice? Are we working for the overthrow of this dictatorship, or are we trying to do the impossible by trying to be completely neutral in the context of an actual battle taking place on the streets? So the leftists that are not pro-Sisi are paralyzed in all practical respects.

I'll give you an example. There were demonstrations when Mubarak was acquitted last year. These demonstrations grew quite rapidly. A few thousand tried to storm into Tahrir Square. Many on the left who took part in those demonstrations, once they saw Muslim Brotherhood youth joining in, simply left. They literally went home.

We see that as a huge mistake, as a formula for paralysis and for complete isolation for the left. It's an approach that will give the Muslim Brotherhood an opportunity to rebuild the mass base that it lost during the Morsi presidency because people will start to think that the only force actually trying to confront Sisi's dictatorship is the Islamists, not the left.

The position we take is that we want to be part of the movement against Sisi and against the dictatorship, but we want to do that as an independent force. And we want to do that with a clear understanding that the Muslim Brotherhood betrayed this revolution. But we will not be part of the false "Islamic vs. secular" division that has only helped the Mubarak regime previously and the Sisi regime currently to stay in power.

I want to start a serious debate on the left, both in Egypt and among comrades internationally, on the question of Islamic fundamentalism. The problem in Egypt is obvious and should be clear to everyone. The Egyptian Communist Party issued leaflets in support of the massacre of Muslim Brotherhood activists on August 14, 2013. In fact, a lot of leftists did this. On the other hand, there are leftists including some influential revolutionary leftists, mainly from the 1970s generation, who take a position that is neutral in practical terms. They say that they are, of course, against the Sisi dictatorship, but they are equally against the Muslim Brotherhood—they're two sides of the same coin.

For me, this is a catastrophic formulation that must be seriously debated. I think it's not only catastrophic in terms of Egypt, but for the revolutionary left internationally. How do you understand the Islamic movement, and how do you relate to it, and how do you understand it in terms of a wider context? And what position does the radical left take toward it? I think that after the emergence of ISIS on the one hand and what happened with the Arab revolutions and the role of the Islamic movement in them on the other hand, we need to have a new debate about Marxism and the Islamic movement, in order to sharpen and clarify our positions.

---

## **P.S.**

\* "From revolution to reaction in Egypt". Socialist Worker (USA). January 25, 2016:  
<http://socialistworker.org/2016/01/25/from-revolution-to-reaction-in-egypt>

\* Transcription by Sarah Levy, Denise Herrera and Andrea Hektor.

---

## **Footnotes**

[1] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/21/egyptian-police-raid-cairo-homes-2011-uprising>

[2] <https://www.jacobinmag.com>