

The rise and fall (and rise and fall) of the Egyptian Left - Final Part - The Arab Spring in Egypt

mercredi 28 juin 2023, par [BUTLAND Phil](#), [EL-HAMALAWY Hossam](#) (Date de rédaction antérieure : 24 juin 2023).

Hi again Hossam. At the end of our last interview, we talked about events in Egypt just before the beginnings of the region-wide Arab Spring. What happened to finally trigger these massive protests ?

Khaled Said was a young, middle-class Alexandrian man whom regime police brutally tortured and killed, and who became an icon and martyr of the Egyptian revolution. Photos of his deformed body spread like wildfire online. This then triggered protests, which snowballed into the events of January 25, marking Egypt's entry into the wider Arab Spring movement.

But Said's murder was not the first violent incident by police that was documented and that spread online. If this had happened in 2000, it would not have triggered a revolution. If this had happened in 2003, it would not have triggered a revolution. If it had happened in 2007, it still would not have triggered a revolution. Revolution is a process.

By 2010, Egyptians were ready to revolt. For 10 years they had been striking, protesting, forming unofficial coordination networks, starting to form independent unions, and crucially, beginning to understand the culture of protest - which had been essentially killed over two decades before the events of the 2000s.

What you're saying strongly contradicts other interpretations of the Arab Spring by many Western pundits. You often hear that Egypt was peaceful until 2010. A flower seller in Tunisia set himself alight in protest, and then the Arab Spring just happened. There are also theories that the revolt was instead a Muslim Brotherhood coup, or even a CIA coup.

These interpretations absolutely ignore the role of workers in trade unions. They also deny agency to ordinary Egyptians. They see the Arab Spring as the work of a few leaders, whether the Brotherhood, the CIA or whomever wanted to take power.

This narrative suited many people in the West and elsewhere, because they wanted limited reform within Egypt. Many Western countries were the sponsors of the various Arab regimes. It suited Western dreams to talk about the middle-class and bilingual, internet-savvy youth on their Blackberries, or on Facebook and Twitter, sharing how they love Western democracy.

According to this narrative, someone created a Facebook event and then there was revolution. It played well with the Western press, and at first, this narrative also helped the Egyptian military, who were keen to stop the revolution from progressing into a widespread social revolt that involved the working class and the urban poor.

So, you can imagine the military saying : "Thanks Internet kids for getting rid of Mubarak. Now what the fuck are the workers doing ? Why are they striking ? Why are people protesting gentrification ?"

These social revolts were not welcome.

If you weren't a well-dressed, middle-class kid with a Blackberry device, then you were a criminal thug. For the first two years of the revolution, the military whipped up fears of rampant crime. Criminal thugs are raiding your homes, they're going rape your women. A daily Egyptian television program called, "Security for All," also worked to stoke fear amid the public.

This narrative was misleading. Access to social media and the internet was blocked over the 18 days of revolt in Egypt. If this was just an online revolution, it would have been stopped early on. But when there was a telecommunication shutdown, we activists would send someone to journalists at Al-Jazeera to say, "I'm a representative of the revolutionaries in Tahrir, and I have news for you. Tomorrow, we are organizing a million-strong protest in Cairo and elsewhere."

Al-Jazeera would then announce this to Egyptians in their homes, watching TV – and then people would start mobilizing. If Mubarak had shut down Al-Jazeera, this would have affected the revolution far more than the internet shutdown did at the time.

The Western narrative you mentioned doesn't only negate the complex social processes that had been going on for a decade, but also it negates the fact that it was not the Tahrir Square revolts which brought down Mubarak in the end. If it was only us in Tahrir, Mubarak would have survived.

What mattered were the industrial actions during the last week of the uprising. Egypt at this time witnessed its strongest wave of strikes, much stronger than anything you can imagine. Literally the entire country went on strike, probably only excepting the police. The military had to intervene and depose Mubarak, before the whole system collapsed.

Once Mubarak stepped down, the first legislation to come from the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces [SCAF, the body that assumed power] was an anti-strike law. Propaganda against the strike movement was widespread, labeling the workers as greedy. They were told, "You only care about yourself. The country is going through a revolution. We should focus first on the political process, the constitutional reforms, like electing a new government which will give you your rights. But you shouldn't go on strike now."

The denunciation of the strikes didn't just come from SCAF or the armed forces. It also came from liberals and the Muslim Brotherhood, from virtually every group except some factions of the Egyptian Left. We saw that these industrial actions were indeed the spirit of the revolution. The slogan that was raised in Tahrir was "Bread, Freedom and Social Justice." The goal of the strikes was to fight for social justice. How else do you think social justice is going to happen ?

Let's review a bit. In part three of our interview, you explained how nearly every significant action of the Egyptian Left had been inspired by events in Palestine. You've written an article saying that the commemoration in Egypt of the 75th anniversary of the Nakba was barely existent. What does this say about the state of the Egyptian Left, now 12 years after the Arab Spring ?

It is very sad. But it is also very telling of what the general political situation in Egypt is like. Palestine has always been a big source of inspiration for both the Egyptian Left and the Islamists. Egyptian youth were often radicalized and politicized by the Palestinian cause. Whenever anything happened in Palestine, the first reactions would be seen immediately in Egypt. And the strongest and the most militant reactions would come from Egypt.

The counter-revolution in Egypt, over the past 10 years, has done two things. First, President Abdel

Fattah el-Sisi has dismantled anything that is even remotely political in the country. He has dismantled any structures which had worked to agitate, organize or sustain the momentum of activism. All the organizations which penned leaflets and coordinated action have been crushed.

The second thing is that the state's wielding of lethal force has sent a message that any sort of assembly is not welcome and will have drastic consequences. As we speak, there are some Egyptian youth who are now in prison simply because they called for an event called "Batman Helwan," for which they said participants were going to dress up as the comic book character Batman. It was a joke. These young people are in prison on terror charges. Anything you can imagine in Egypt is now being suppressed in the name of the "war on terror." It is very sad to see.

After the coup, the counter-revolutionary forces wanted their revenge on the many causes that supporters of the revolution had adopted. This included support for Palestine, as the Palestine flag had been present at every single protest.

If you talk about the queer community in Egypt, the biggest crackdown here did not happen during this first year of Muslim Brotherhood rule. It happened under the supposedly enlightened and secular military regime, that "saved Egypt from those medieval Islamists."

Why is the queer community being attacked now, even though they aren't politically organized and do not directly threaten the establishment ? It is because anything that is a threat to the strictly disciplined, traditional social and political order is being now attacked by the counter -revolution. And Palestine also fits within that context, unfortunately.

You've talked about the importance of Al-Jazeera and internet blogs. You've posted photos online for free, calling them the "visual memory of the class." Could you explain what you mean by that, and why it's important for you to make images accessible both from Egyptian uprisings and from protests here in Berlin ?

Trotsky describes a revolutionary party as the memory of the class. Under feudalism, for example, the bourgeoisie - when it was still a revolutionary class and rebelling against feudalism - created most of the revolutionary parties amid the revolt itself. Now why is that ? It's because there wasn't this ideological hegemony of feudalism over the bourgeoisie.

Here I'm using analogies from British activist Tony Cliff, that a bourgeois capitalist could look at a feudal lord and tell them, "You have the church. I have the university. You have the land ; I have the machinery. I might even have more money than you. When you're broke, you will marry your daughter into my family, because I will save you."

The situation of workers under capitalism is different. Capitalists have ideological hegemony over the workers. There isn't any way to escape this. They control the means of communication. They control the media in all its forms. They control education, the institutions that we live in. It is very difficult to get unplugged from this matrix.

That's why people like us, the crazies, are a minority, right up until the revolution. It's only when the revolution happens, that a revolutionary minority becomes the majority. I've seen this. In 2011, everyone was an activist. I would walk down the street and hear Egyptians discussing the referendum and constitutional reforms.

In the 1990s, before I joined the Revolutionary Socialists, and I knew a couple of kids at my university. We all liked reading existentialist writers, and we asked ourselves when the day would come when Egyptians sitting in coffee shops would discuss Sartre (we had this elitist view). But I

saw this on the streets. People were discussing class struggle or the Revolutionary Socialists, or the strikes, or whether this state should continue, or should we bring it down ?

When Trotsky talked about a revolutionary party as the memory of the class, he was aware that we live in a state of continual amnesia. Not because we're stupid, but because the common-sense realm around us is controlled by the bourgeoisie at the end of the day.

So those of us who are unplugged from the matrix should create a forum in a sense, where we sit down and we examine, for example, what happened in the Iranian Revolution in 1979. So that when we have our revolution, we can try to avoid those mistakes. What happened in the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 ? What happened during the Spanish Civil War ? Not just these revolutions but also the small struggles. We should preserve the memories of these.

The next time I'm speaking at a university, say, and people tell me that Egyptians have always worshipped pharaohs, I can tell them instead that the first recorded strike in history took place in ancient Egypt. Just five years ago there was an important strike in Egyptian steel mills, but you never heard about it, as the mainstream press is controlled by the state.

Where would you read about this strike ? You'd find it in the crime news section, in an article that reports that people have tried to instigate riots and sabotage the factory, and that the police have saved the country from saboteurs.

What is the best way to preserve the memory of the class ? A picture speaks 1,000 words. Audio recordings are also important, but people can say about a recording that you're lying. How can you prove that an event happened just by talking about it ? In my public talks, I always present a slide show, so that whatever story I'm telling, I'm also showing.

You can't imagine the number of people who have come up to me and told me that in 2011, they were following my photos. They said they could not believe that such a thing was happening in Egypt. They couldn't believe what the strikers in Mahalla were doing. And that witnessing these events through media inspired and instigated them to start taking action themselves.

Now I am here in Germany and it's a different situation, of course. But I do believe that it's not that there is something in the water here that prevents Germans from becoming revolutionary. There is a revolutionary tradition here in Germany that is as old as capitalism. It has its martyrs, it has produced intellectuals, it has produced sincere activists. And this is the kind of tradition that as an Egyptian revolutionary, I am proud to be affiliating with.

These are my own people. Rosa Luxemburg is my martyr, not just a martyr for the Germans. Karl Liebknecht is the same. So are the guys who fought the Nazis and who died in concentration camps. We are part of one international class. These are not abstract slogans. A defeat that happens anywhere creates a domino effect, but so does a victory.

We've seen glimpses of it with the Arab Spring. The day when former President Ben Ali fell in Tunisia, I was with a comrade who is a prominent labor lawyer. We were meeting a diving instructor friend in Alexandria, because he wanted to establish a trade union for diving instructors. And on the screen came the news that Ben Ali had fallen. People were clapping in the coffee shop. They were saying, Mubarak is next. And 10 days later, the Egyptian revolution started.

People can draw parallels. This does not negate that there was a complex process beforehand. When a revolution breaks out in one country, this does not mean that it is a revolutionary hot point in a sea of calm. It means that the larger region is already in turmoil, because capitalism has unified us. We are all part of the same globalized, interlinked economy.

You're both a photographer and print journalist. In 2011, we followed both your images and articles, and found them very useful to make sense of what was going on in Egypt. You're relaunching your blog - why now ?

People should subscribe to the blog if they are interested in following news and analysis of what's happening in Egypt. I do admit my coverage will be largely focused on Egypt. Sometimes I will write about things that are happening elsewhere. But my focus is mainly Egypt.

I feel that Egypt has dropped out of the news. Whenever the country is talked about, it's about archaeological discoveries or tourist destinations, or about Egypt fighting illegal immigration or cracking down on groups amid a continued war on terror. But Egypt has the largest working class in the region. What happens in Egypt reverberates, you know, all over the Arab world.

Germany is the biggest arms exporter to Egypt. People here should know what their tax money is doing to us, to Egyptians back home.

Over the past few years, I haven't been writing or blogging much. This was mainly because I was absorbed by my doctoral dissertation, which addresses Egyptian security services and the post-2013 regime in Egypt. I will share my findings and my analysis on the blog, as well as all the information that I've dug up regarding the security sector and the mechanics of repression in Egypt.

People should look outside their borders to what's happening in the rest of the world. It's not just the financial capitals of the West that determine the situation in advanced industrial societies. Events that happen on the fringes of the international world order, in places like Egypt and elsewhere, can impact the entire global system.

I believe that 10 years after the counter-revolution, things are not going well for Sisi, Egypt's military dictator and president. The project in which he has invested is crumbling under the weight of debt. There has been a falling out between Sisi and regional backers, like the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, countries which helped finance the counter-revolution.

There are prospects for changes in Egypt, it's not clear yet in which direction. Before 2011, I used to write on my old blog about things that will happen in the future. These events did happen, but it wasn't because I was a clairvoyant, I knew because I was connected to a network on the ground, that would give me the pulse of what's going on, and would allow me to see things that other mainstream journalists couldn't see.

I used to say, keep your eyes on Mahalla. No one really cared, but then the uprising happened three months before the revolution. I wrote a famous blog post called, "There's something in the air," that argued that Egypt was approaching revolution. I was interviewed by this BBC journalist after Tunisia's Ben Ali was toppled. The journalist was so cynical, and he ridiculed me when I said that Egypt was next. When at the time, you could not even gather a few hundred people in public. This guy ended up chasing me later, during the 18 days of the Egyptian revolution.

In finishing, I hope that that people will subscribe to my newsletter. And I hope that I will not let them down in terms of providing content that will be interesting and will open new horizons about knowledge and information from this important part of the world.

The other parts of this interview are :

Part 1 : 1919 Revolution to Nasser

<https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article66910>

Part 2 - Egypt's 1968 and the aftermath

<https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article66936>

Part 3 - The 1990s and early 2000s : Palestine provides a spark for the Egyptian Left

<https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article66942>

Part 4 - The early 2000s – rise in class struggle

<https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article66943>

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<https://3arabawy.substack.com/>

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First published

<https://www.theleftberlin.com/the-rise-and-fall-and-rise-and-fall-of-the-egyptian-left-final-part/>