

The Egyptian Revolution Continues: An Interview

Sunday 11 December 2011, by [EL-HAMALAWY Hossam](#), [MUSTAFA Ali](#) (Date first published: 10 December 2011).

Hossam el-Hamalawy is a leading Egyptian journalist, photographer, and socialist activist from Cairo who maintains the widely followed blog 3arabawy. He is also actively involved in the Revolutionary Socialists, the Center for Socialist Studies, and the Workers Democratic Party. I had the fortunate opportunity to sit down and talk with him about his views on the current state of the Egyptian revolution following the latest revolt in Tahrir Square this past November, arguably the fiercest and most important display of popular resistance to the ruling military regime to take place since the January 25th uprising that toppled former president Hosni Mubarak some ten month ago.

Ali Mustafa: The first parliamentary elections of the post-Mubarak era have just been staged against a backdrop of deadly clashes between state security forces and protesters in and around Tahrir Square that left at least 42 people dead and over 3000 injured. What exactly spurred the recent outbreak of violence and how do you think these surrounding circumstances affect the overall legitimacy of the elections?

Hossam el-Hamalawy: What triggered the uprising this time are the same conditions that also triggered the January uprising. There isn't much that has changed over the past months, so the objective conditions for the revolt were there; all we needed was the trigger, something to happen that would basically ignite the whole situation again. We've had this before. This is not the first time we've had these kind of confrontations. We had them on the 28th and 29th of June, and the main trigger is always police brutality - police brutality that will not go away any time soon because the Interior Ministry is still there as it is, and the regime is still there as it is. This uprising is not going to last forever and is fizzling down as we speak now, but I believe it's not going to be the last one. There will be more uprisings to follow in the future.

How has this affected the legitimacy of the elections? Of course, it did. I had already taken the position even before the current uprising of boycotting the coming elections because they are happening while the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) is still in power [1]. You cannot have clean elections while Mubarak's generals are still running the show or when the army, together with the police, had just massacred people in Tahrir, and Maspero. They were not even held accountable, and now they are the ones supposedly in charge of supervising the whole process?

More importantly, it's not about who you vote into this inept parliament. My argument was that even if you elect one hundred percent Revolutionary Socialists in parliament - forget about the Salafis or the *Ikhwan* - still you will not be able to achieve the goals of the revolution. If you bring a prophet or a saint to be the prime minister today in Egypt, he will still remain a puppet in the hands of SCAF. If you elect a president today, while the situation is still as it is, he will also be a puppet in the hands of

SCAF. SCAF are opting for a model which is like the old Turkish model where you get the people enjoying elections, electing civilian politicians in suits, and having civilian cabinets, but with specific red lines that cannot be crossed, and once they are crossed you will get a phone call from the army - or you will get a coup.

Unlike other activists who might tell you that SCAF never wants to leave power and they want to stay there forever, I sincerely believe they want to leave, but they want to go back to their barracks in a way that allows them to keep their privileges, their lack of accountability in front of the government, and their control over military budget so as to ensure it doesn't go down. Why would you busy yourself with running the daily affairs of the country when you can get your own puppets to run it and you keep all of your privileges? So, actually the people most keen on having these elections were SCAF! Unlike other conspiracy theories that will tell you that they instigated this violence in order to postpone it - no, they want these elections!

AM: There have been many comparisons made between this recent uprising and the one of January 25th. What are some of the key similarities and differences worth highlighting between then and now?

HH: In the first day or two days of this uprising I was calmly drawing parallels with the 28th and 29th of June, but as the uprising went into its third day I was definitely recalling January. The fierce level of confrontations with the police has definitely been unprecedented since January. You can draw parallels between them in terms of police brutality triggering the uprising, in terms of the tactic of occupying the square, in terms of even repeating the same battles on Mohamad Mahmoud Street that were very reminiscent of the 29th of January - the day after the 'Friday of Anger' there was a massacre on that street. But there are differences, of course. Not all sections of the population took part in the uprising, unlike January where there was a higher level of participation.

The other qualitative difference is that you were then revolting against Mubarak; now you are revolting against his own army generals. This is a plus, meaning we've come a long way. In February or March if you would have chanted against the army generals in a protest you could have been lynched by the people themselves - not by the military police - I mean by the people. Many people believed the lies and the propaganda of the army at the time about them protecting the revolution, or that it's Tahrir that's causing all of the instability, but ten months later when you get this full scale uprising basically against the military and a strong occupation that lasted for a few days with the one demand of putting the army generals in jail then you know you've come a long way in terms of the consciousness of the people

The uprising didn't succeed, obviously; we still have the army generals running the country. But it's not going to be the last uprising, and we have, at least, I would say, from 3 to 6 years of ebbs and flows, of battles to be won and others to be lost. But in general I'm optimistic. I'm not pessimistic about it.

AM: The Egyptian military, headed by SCAF, has been a central institution in the country for several decades now. How would you describe the place of the army in Egypt's political, economic, and social life, and what is the historical basis for the depth of support it still enjoys among many ordinary Egyptians?

HH: The talk about the army being the most popular institution among Egyptians is a complete lie. How can you judge that? When it's conscription time, do you find hundreds of thousands of Egyptian youth just running and flocking to the camps in order to enroll in the service? No, everybody tries to bribe his way out or dodge the service - that's the barometer, really. When it's conscription time, what's the behavior of Egyptians?

The army has been the ruling institution in this country since 1952. All the presidents have come from military backgrounds. Many of the cabinet ministers also come from army general backgrounds. Many of the governors also come from similar backgrounds. Many of the public sector CEO's are given those companies to manage as a reward after they retire from military service. So, the army is entrenched in our civilian life. They control from 25 to 40 percent of our economy. You can't get any accurate stats about them because there is a big iron curtain that the military have drawn around themselves over these past decades. SCAF receives \$1.3 billion every year from US taxpayers, and they are the second largest recipient of US foreign aid after Israel.

Some Egyptians, or wide layers of the Egyptian public, supported the army in February, March, April and up until the summer for several reasons: some of them believed the army's lies that they protected the revolution. Others were just insecure - put yourself in the shoes of the average Egyptian citizen who is not ideological and who is just going about their daily life and suddenly everything around them is collapsing, and the alternative is not clear. For many Egyptians the army, as the propaganda went, was the last standing institution in Egypt - if the army collapses, Israel is going to invade, or Egypt itself is going to collapse. Actually, the army is playing the same 'anarchy' card as Mubarak, saying that if it steps down anarchy will be everywhere. And finally, the people were exhausted. Literally, everybody was exhausted. We went into an uprising of 18 days that lost so many people - it was very exhausting keeping the square and all the other squares organized around this movement. Everyone needed to catch their breath a little bit at the time. So, that's what I would attribute the kind of support that the army had.

Now, of course, the army did not protect the revolution. The only reason the army did not fire at protesters in Tahrir and elsewhere is that you have two armies: you have the army of the generals, and you have the army of the poor conscripts and the young officers who share the same plight and hardship as all other Egyptians. The generals understood quite well that if they gave the orders for the tanks to bomb us in Tahrir, this army would have collapsed - you would have gotten a mutiny or a refusal of orders. So, the generals were hoping that they would just stand still, be neutral, and the thugs would finish us, like what happened in the 'Battle of the Camel'. Now definitely they have been losing credit over the past months. The Egyptian people are not stupid! Yes, I might have supported the army today, but if I don't see them delivering and I find my own situation is just as bad as it was, or even getting worse than it was before the revolution, I'm bound to get disillusioned after a while. So, I would say definitely we're in a much better position than we were back in February in terms of the consciousness of the people.

AM: The Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) is expected to perform very well in the elections, even more so than originally anticipated due to many people deciding to abstain or boycott the vote. What role do you see the Muslim Brotherhood playing in the Egyptian revolution right now and how does it contrast with the period of January and February?

HH: Their role did not differ anything from January or February. Remember that the Brotherhood leadership did not endorse the first three days of the uprising. They only endorsed it on the 'Friday of Anger' on the 28th of January, when it became clear that whether they endorse it or not there is an uprising in effect. But their youth have been taking part in the protests from day one - or at least sections of their youth have been taking part, and their performance in Tahrir Square and elsewhere during the 18 days was no different from today. The youth played a heroic role in the confrontations with police in defending the square, and they had many martyrs. But the leadership was always trying to compromise during the 18 days.

From the 11th of February when Mubarak fell, their leadership did not endorse any of the protests that happened over the past months, except about three: the one that was celebrating Mubarak's

toppling that happened a week later, the 29th of July, and this latest one on the 18th of November. These are the only three mass protests that the Ikhwan endorsed. But the young members have been taking part in our protests, and there are people who are resigning and getting disillusioned. So, although their leadership is conservative and on occasions counterrevolutionary, their youth is a different story. And that's what I and other people on the secular Left are trying to bet on - that as this radicalization continues, there will be more splits in the *Ikhwan* and other religious groups.

AM: Egyptians are currently being portrayed as trapped between 'Islamists' on the one hand, and military rule under the SCAF on the other - as if these are the only two viable options available for Egypt. What role do you see liberals, working class people, as well as radicals needing to play at this critical stage in the revolution?

HH: This is the same scenario that Mubarak was trying to put forward when he was in power - you know, it's either me or these 'monsters' in beards; it's either me or anarchy. Politically, when you think about it, in terms of the elections, that may be the case - you either elect the NDP or you elect the 'Islamists' - but I'm talking here about politics on the ground. No, there are other alternatives. The revolutionary left has been making gains, massive gains, since January up until today in terms of increasing the scope of its influence and its physical presence on the ground. Our intervention in the industrial actions is definitely getting much more mature and much more organized than before. During this current uprising, from my position as a Revolutionary Socialist, I can say that my group played a much more organized and effective role than during the first days of the January uprising, when we were all taken by surprise. This time our intervention was much quicker, much faster.

The liberals are a completely different story. The liberals are divided. There are people like Naguib Sawiris, our Egyptian Rockefeller, who was a close ally of Mubarak and is now leading the Free Egyptians Party. According to an infamous interview with Bloomberg that he made last summer, when he was asked why he launched this party, he said it was because of the dominance of socialist ideas among young people - he didn't mention the Salafis or the Ikhwanis. He's a businessman who knows his own interests quite well. But there's a problem with the terminology because many of those liberals, people who describe themselves as liberals, are actually radical Leftists, but they don't know it - in the same way many 'Leftists' I consider liberals who have nothing to do with the Left.

But I believe the industrial actions that will come in the coming months will be even more militant than in the months before. Why? Because the SCAF has managed to raise the expectations of a layer of the population regarding this coming parliament - you told us to suspend protests; you told us to stop strikes; you told us Tahrir was bad; you told us to wait all these months so as to get a civilian cabinet that will miraculously solve all of our problems. Okay, well, we got our civilian parliament, and it can't do anything! This will ignite, I believe, a renewed wave of industrial actions.

AM: Can you provide an overview of the kind of left-oriented parties, groups, and coalitions that have emerged out of the Egyptian revolution since January 25th, and what is your opinion of the progress being made on the organized political front compared with the level of grassroots resistance on the ground?

HH: The map is definitely getting bigger than it was before January 25th. On the Left you have now the Socialist Popular Alliance, which is a political umbrella that also has beneath it several leftist factions. You have us, the Revolutionary Socialists, who are the biggest among the radical Left here in Egypt. You have the Democratic Workers' Party, which is a party that the Revolutionary Socialists are a part of the efforts to build (but it's not a Revolutionary Socialists party, because many people confuse the two). The Egyptian Communist Party was recently revived, and they came out in the public on the 1st of May with red flags, but I know they are facing troubles because we are currently

recruiting many of their youth. You have the Egyptian Socialist Party, launched by some figures from the 1970s student-activist generation. You also have the Egyptian Social Democratic Party - so, it's getting more *mosaic-ish*, if I can call it that.

You will find some people who will weep over a lack of unity among the Left, but you know, I really don't care that much about it. Why? Because we are 85 million people who have been kept under the lid for so long; once you open the lid it's very normal that everybody's going to come out, people are going to start forming groups, and maybe those groups are going to merge, or maybe they're going to split or morph into something bigger - it's not like in Canada where if you go to any activist event you'll find chairs for twelve leftist factions. Yes, you might mock them and say maybe this faction is only like three people in all of Canada, but it's a microcosm. If you have 85 million people, then why not have 12 different socialist parties. You can!

AM: And the organized political front versus grassroots resistance?

HH: It would be a sheer lie to try to claim that the current socialist forces, including us, are leading the strike wave or the grassroots resistance on the ground. You are definitely faced with the biggest strike wave that this country has seen since 1946; this strike wave that's been continuous from December 2006 up until today is the longest, strongest, and most sustained strike action wave in our history, since 1946. Even the 70s were not as strong as we are today. But again, these actions are happening largely spontaneously and independent from any activist groups. The activists groups have some presence in some of the mills, some of the factories, some of the workplaces, and some of the unions, but they are not running the show in any sense. We cannot claim that at all. So, the labour movement is taking mass leaps forward - they've achieved great victories in terms of successful strikes, getting rid of the old management in many of the factories that were affiliated with the old regime, forming independent unions, dissolving the corrupt unions that they had in some cases - but this is independent of the activist groups. The activist groups do have a presence in some places and they also played a heroic role in the mobilizations, but I think we still have a very long way to go in order to provide real leadership on the ground for the Egyptian working class.

AM: You have been a revolutionary activist here in Egypt for many years and have stated in the past that only a general strike will ultimately topple the ruling military regime once and for all. Can you describe the state of the Egyptian workers' struggle at this point, including some of the key strikes and actions that have happened in recent months, and what you believe will be required to galvanize workers across sectors towards staging a general strike under the current conditions?

HH: When Mubarak was toppled on the 11th of February and the middle class and most of the youth groups were more than happy to suspend the Tahrir sit-in and there were calls for everybody to go back to work amidst all of this nationalist propaganda - you know, 'let's build a new Egypt' and 'put 110 percent of your effort into work' - the working class did not go. A journalist like myself, I can afford not showing up to work for 18 days, but then go back to my editorial position where I will get several thousand Egyptian pounds a month. But a public transport worker cannot basically suspend his strike and go back home to his kids and tell them, "I'm still getting paid 189 Egyptian pounds after fifteen years of service; let's wait for another six months while the ruling military junta gives us a civilian cabinet so as to solve all our problems."

According to a labour organizer friend of mine, you witnessed at least 1,500 industrial actions in February alone, which is the total amount of all industrial actions in 2010. Now, these actions continued in February through March, and went down a little bit in April, May, and June. But then you had September, which was probably the month that had the biggest hit in terms of strikes, where roughly three quarters of a million Egyptians took part in a strike; they were mainly in the

public transport sector, the teachers, the doctors, and the sugar refineries. Here we are only mentioning the major blocs, but you opened up the newspaper at the time and all these wildcat strikes were happening everywhere.

We did not witness any strike actions in solidarity with Tahrir in this uprising; it is true that the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions, and some independent unions, supported Tahrir and they had their banners there and a symbolic presence there, but they didn't mobilize full scale. My explanation for this is that, on the one hand, the Independent Federation is still not rooted enough so as to be able to put together a general strike; and number two, the working class is usually the last class to move - it's very easy for the youth and the radicals to just leave their family or university for a month to go to Tahrir and set up a camp. If you're a worker and you have four kids and you're working a 9 to 5, and sometimes even a 9 to 7 job, to put together a strike action is a completely different story. They are usually the last to move, but when they move it's game over.

What I and other radicals in the movement were hoping for in this November uprising was that if we kept the occupation going for a little bit longer this militancy would start spilling over to the working class, just like January. Now, of course, it's not going to just happen by some miracle from the sky. In the places where we had an industrial presence we distributed tens of thousands of leaflets in support of the general strike, but, once again, you don't have the national structure here in Egypt - yet - that can pull together this move, so if it happens it's going to be spontaneous, or you can hope to trigger it somehow. But when they tell you that Egypt is not Tunisia it is true! Tunisia had their federation of trade unions whose leadership was co-opted, but it's body was quite healthy, so this meant that when you had the revolution there was so much pressure on the unions to move - and when they move they can bring the country to a halt. Here in Egypt you don't have this structure.

The general strike is coming. I have no doubt about this; what you don't know is what's going to be the outcome of the general strike. But the ball is in our court - can we push it left or right, that's what we'll see. At the moment there are several important protests taking place, mainly in Alexandria. Tomorrow in Cairo there will be a protest in front of the State Council in Dokki on Giza Street - it's called Magles Al-Dawla - where workers from two privatized factories are going to show up for a court case to demand the re-nationalization of their companies - which they already won, by the way. That's the other problem: even when you have a strike that reaches victory it never means that the government is going to fulfill its promises. Just pick and choose the name of any company that's right now on strike and I will tell you that they have been on strike since 2009, or even 2007!

AM: Due to the growing instability, uncertainty, and unrest the country has witnessed in recent months, it seems that Tahrir Square is becoming increasingly alienated from the wider society in a way we did not find during the early days of the Egyptian revolution. What does all of this mean for the future of Tahrir Square as a central hub of the revolution in your view?

HH: I think this is a bit exaggerated what you're saying. Tahrir Square is for sure the symbol of this revolution but we will not fall into the trap of taking Tahrir as a barometer for how the revolution is progressing or regressing. That's what we've been saying to activists for the past months who have been demoralized. For example, you call for a 'Million Man Protest' in Tahrir to denounce military tribunals and only a few hundred show up, so you get demoralized. But at the same time, within the same month, you have 750,000 Egyptians going on strike and, in effect, destroying the emergency law. Even if they didn't show up at your own protest in Tahrir Square, they effectively broke the emergency law.

I've been in situations where I would be with a cab driver and he would be all the way slagging off on the people in Tahrir, but then he drops me off in order to go and join a sit-in by other cab drivers

in front of the Finance Ministry here in Nasr City. Yes, workers would not show up for Tahrir, but they would show up two blocks away at the Cabinet headquarters, blocking the road and defying the military police – even clashing with them on occasions – to demand their own rights. Tahrir will always be there, and it will be killed again like in January at some point in the future. When? I don't know, but the revolution is much bigger than the scope of Tahrir.

For me, whatever happens on the university campuses and in the workplaces is even much more important than Tahrir. If you're a Mahalla worker and I see in you in Tahrir, I will tell you, "What the hell are you doing with me in Tahrir? Go back to your own factory and try to purge the NDP and the security officials that you have. Try to take over your own factory and self-manage it!"

AM: What do you see as the most important political challenges currently facing the Egyptian revolution?

HH: The biggest political challenge is, number one, the fact that we have Mubarak's army generals still running the show, which in effect means that the regime is still alive and well. The other political challenge is from the dissidents, which is that we are not organized enough. We still lack the national mobilization structure that can pull together a general strike when we want it, so what we can always do in these situations is to call for a protest, but we don't know how many people are going to show up. Yes, you can get signs, you can predict that it's going to be a big day or small day, but the biggest challenge for us is building this mass political revolutionary party, or call it a network or whatever, that will link the workplaces together to the university campuses and to Tahrir.

AM: Finally, at a time when the global Occupy movement is rapidly growing across North America and Europe, influenced largely by Egypt and the other uprisings across the Arab world, what do you think are the main lessons - positive and negative - activists and ordinary people committed to social change should take away from the experience of the Egyptian revolution?

HH: There is only one lesson, actually: if your movement remains confined to the square than you're not going to succeed. You have to take this movement from the square to the workplaces and the university campuses. We did not topple Mubarak in Tahrir. Yes, Tahrir was a heroic battle, a heroic sit-in, and a heroic occupation, which will definitely go down in history as one of the most fantastic struggles that happened this century, but at the same time, the regime could have held out; Mubarak could have stayed in power for a much longer time if it wasn't for the labour strikes that broke out. So, I'm very proud of our colleagues and brothers and sisters who have taken part in the Occupy movement everywhere, but they have to link their struggle to the workplaces. If they don't bring in the working class – which is a big challenge, and I'm not saying it's something easy – then this movement is going to die.

P.S.

* From New Socialist, Saturday, 10 December 2011 17:49:
http://newsocialist.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=551:the-egyptian-revolution-continues-an-interview-with-hossam-el-hamalawy-&catid=51:analysis&Itemid=98

* Hossam El-Hamalawy is an Egyptian journalist, photographer, and socialist activist from Cairo who

maintains the popular blog: www.arabawy.org

Ali Mustafa is a freelance journalist, writer, and media activist. He is currently based in Cairo, Egypt. His writing can be found at: <http://frombeyondthemargins.blogspot.com>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/node/514258>