

INTERVIEW

## **All of Egypt is Tahrir**

samedi 6 juillet 2013, par [SHAWKI Ahmed](#) (Date de rédaction antérieure : 5 juillet 2013).

**Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi has been toppled at the hands of a military that was the backbone of the Hosni Mubarak regime before the dictator fell. Yet the mass celebrations of Morsi's downfall in Cairo's Tahrir Square and around the country represent the real face of this latest stage in the Egyptian revolution.**

**Morsi's ouster came four days after a day of mass protest involving millions upon millions, as a culmination of the Tamarod (Rebellion) petition campaign to call on Morsi to resign. Egyptian revolutionaries say the reach of the June 30 demonstrations was even greater than in February 2011, with immense turnouts in every part of the country.**

**Ahmed Shawki, editor of the *International Socialist Review* and an eyewitness to the revolution in February 2011, talked to about what brought about the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood—and the dynamics at play in the next wave of Egypt's revolution.**

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**Eric Ruder - MUCH OF the Western media portray the downfall of Morsi as the result of a military coup. But the immediate backdrop was the massive mobilizations on June 30. What's the political significance of the military stepping in to push Morsi aside ?**

Ahmed Shawki - BEFORE WE talk about the Egyptian military's ousting of Morsi, it's worth recalling that the military was the heir to the first wave of the revolution that began on January 25 and saw the departure of Hosni Mubarak on February 11, 2011.

At that time, the army stepped in and tried to guide—ultimately, to hijack—two simultaneous processes. One process was the transformation of Egypt set in motion by the uprising, and the other was the political process of drafting and implementing a constitution.

The army has had a long history in modern Egyptian politics, including the overthrow of the monarchy in 1952 and the installation of the Free Officers Movement under the leadership of Gamal Abdel Nasser, an army colonel who became president in 1956. But the army is very different today from what it was then. It's much bigger, for one. And it's an army that is not only a political and military power, but also a huge economic power, because it directly owns big chunks of the Egyptian economy.

Another factor is who trains the armed forces. During monarchical rule, the army had been trained by either the British or the French. Under Nasser, the orientation was toward the former USSR, and the army's officer corps was largely trained and educated there. Today, the people leading the army have been trained and educated in U.S. military academies. So on the whole, Egypt's military forces now tend to identify with American institutions of power.

Once the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) took over political leadership after Mubarak in 2011, the army quickly moved to get a constitution ratified. This constitution largely benefited the third force in Egyptian politics other than the military on the one hand and the remnants of the Mubarak regime (the feloul) on the other—namely, the Muslim Brotherhood.

Since then, the military has relied on the Muslim Brotherhood to contain the revolution. The Brotherhood won the first set of elections for parliament, and then it won the presidency.

Though the Brotherhood could claim to have achieved this democratically, the people of Egypt broadly considered the process of ratifying the constitution severely flawed. It was written in about a day, its approval was rushed through, and it included all kinds of provisions that Morsi, after his election, was able to exploit.

Over the past year, Morsi overstepped his mandate in several ways and alienated broad swathes of Egyptian society, as it became clear that Morsi was intent on advancing the narrow interests of the Brotherhood rather than advancing the interests of most Egyptians, who were angry at years of privation, repression and poverty. Morsi's attack on the Coptic Christian minority in order to buttress his support among Islamists is one obvious example. But it went much further than that.

I think the most important moment to understand in order to make sense of how we arrived at the present situation was late last year, when Morsi was being hailed by the American media as « the most important man in the Middle East, » as a *Time magazine* cover story put it. This was immediately after he helped negotiate a settlement between Israel and Gaza in the wake of Israel's Operation Pillar of Cloud.

I was in Egypt at that time, and the *Time* cover article hit the newsstands just as tens of thousands of people took to the streets to protest Morsi's attempt to force through an emergency decree that basically aimed at consolidating power in his hands. That sparked a big revival in the opposition movement. Morsi's forces then pushed back, and there were harsh attacks on protesters. But it was clear that all the aspirations raised by the revolution remained unfilled.

Looking back, it's remarkable how quickly Morsi and the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party could alienate such a massive number of people. The Tamarod (Rebellion) movement set out to reclaim what organizers considered to be the aims of the revolution : bread, freedom, social justice and human dignity. These are slogans that mean a better life for most Egyptians.

Tamarod organizers set out to collect 15 million signatures on a petition calling on Morsi to resign. Ultimately, they got 22 million signatures in a period of roughly six weeks—an incredible accomplishment. They set June 30—the one-year anniversary of Morsi's inauguration as president—as a day of protest across Egypt for everyone mobilized by the petition campaign.

I don't think that anyone could have predicted the amazing outcome. The BBC described the mobilization on June 30 as the biggest demonstration in human history.

This was an astonishing outpouring of sympathy and solidarity. People were in the streets in every major and minor city in the country. Most striking was that support for Morsi in the South of the country—which is the historic center and key base for the Brotherhood—virtually evaporated.

For a number of reasons, the South is historically poorer and more religious—not unlike rural areas in many parts of the world, including the U.S. South. It's also heavily dependent on tourism—thus, the Southern region's relationship to the revolution was to see it as a disruption of the tourist trade.

Today, everything's is different, and not just in the South.

It's important to understand what led to this shift. First, it's not merely Morsi's incompetence, stupidity and overreach that explain his epic collapse in support. Revolutions in particular and social movements generally have ongoing dynamics within them. One aspect of this in Egypt is that a politicized population emerged in the outbreak of the first revolution—the flowering of dozens and dozens of newspapers, of political discussion, of political protest and other activity, of new trade unions. All this means there's now a political consciousness and a confidence for people to act.

After Morsi's bid to grab a greater share of power was pushed back, people were rightly worried about another attempt. The Tamarod movement broke the dam by providing a vehicle by which the mass of the Egyptian population were able to make Morsi pay a political price for his actions.

Late last year, for example, in the midst of the controversy over his attempt to reinstate an emergency decree similar to the one enforced under the Mubarak regime, Morsi announced—in order to qualify for a loan from the International Monetary Fund—a series of cuts to basic subsidies that his government was planning to implement.

This wasn't the brightest idea. The people who were worried about the constitution were already pissed off with him and his grab for power. But the very people who were the justification for grabbing power in order to create « stability in a new Egypt » were the victims of cuts to basic food subsidies, which the majority of the population relies on. Morsi quickly retreated because his advisers, his second-in-command and his own party denounced him, though largely for the stupidity of his timing, rather than the substance of what he did.

In another example of arrogance and stupidity, Morsi recently appointed 15 governors to rule various governorates—Egypt is divided into 27 governorates. The man he appointed to be the governor of Luxor belonged to a religious party called al Gama'a al-Islamiyya—a right-wing Islamist party responsible for bomb attacks on ferryboats in Luxor.

This presents a bit of a problem. Luxor is one of the prime tourist destinations in the world. So if you appoint somebody responsible for bombing tourists, it doesn't really help the tourist industry. After the appointment, the government's tourist minister resigned, saying he couldn't continue under these circumstances.

**MILITARY COUPS usually herald the defeat of the revolutionary process—they are often the most extreme representation of the counterrevolution. Does the military's intervention to remove Morsi, appoint a new president and promise new elections represent the victory of counterrevolution ?**

ABSOLUTELY NOT. In every capitalist society and in every nation state in the world, the military is the final arbiter, in a sense, of the rule of the class that's in power—or it's the representative of one or another fraction or grouping within such a class.

Take, for example, the counterrevolution in Chile in 1973—September 11 of this year will mark the 40th anniversary. Without going into the whole history, Chile had historically been run by right-wing political parties and a very strong military, with systematic intervention by U.S. military forces always lurking in the background. In 1964, for example, the U.S. government spent more money on Chile's elections than was spent during the U.S. presidential election of the same year.

With the 1970 election of Salvador Allende and a socialist government—at least in name—a mass movement erupted. This is when then-U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger famously said : « I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its people. The issues are much too important for the Chilean voters to be left to decide for

themselves. »

It was clear that Kissinger and the rest of the U.S. establishment intended to impose a military solution. They waited, they sabotaged the economy, and they funneled money to different groups, all in an attempt to undermine the Allende government. At the end of the day, the military coup took power and slaughtered 30,000 to 40,000 radicals—to teach people a lesson about what is acceptable and what is not to the U.S. government. But it wasn't until the waning phase of the movement that the army could intervene.

In Egypt, the army didn't intervene to help the revolutionary movement make bigger gains or radicalize further of course. The aim was to contain the movement.

But in a certain sense, this was also as an acknowledgement of the fact that the popular will of Egypt will not tolerate the Morsi government anymore. So while the military is in the streets and has overstepped the constitutional limits to its power, I believe that it will seek some means to quickly return power to a civilian authority. I don't think it wants to hold state power.

There's a crisis situation in the Egyptian economy and in Egyptian society that could lead to a much deeper radicalization in the demands of the movement. All over the country, people are now organizing and fighting for rights that they feel have been taken from them. That's why I think it's a mistake to talk about the role of the military in the abstract, without taking into account what is actually happening on the ground.

The Brotherhood's strategy to re-establish order in Egypt was to use repression to end the constant strikes and demonstrations. They really did try to clamp down, in cahoots with the army.

But even more than that, Morsi and the Brotherhood began to use classic divide-and-rule strategies, just as Mubarak tried before—for example, the campaign against Copts and stirring up of religious antagonisms with the infinitesimally small Shia population, which is tiny even compared to the Copts, who account for 10 percent of Egypt's population. But it's the same process in either case—an attempt to use religion for social and political aims.

This has nothing to do with Islam as a religious doctrine, which also angered many people. Most Egyptians are Muslims, but that's not the same as the program of political Islam or the Muslim Brotherhood, which has targeted Christians and women and minority Islamic currents in pursuit of political gains—much in the way that Christian fundamentalists in the U.S. have used « wedge issues » such as gay marriage and abortion rights to pursue a broader right-wing agenda.

On June 30, many of the youth—who were in the forefront of the revolutionary struggle in 2011 and were the initiators of the Tamarod movement—again made it very clear that they took to the street to stand for all Egyptians, not for some Egyptians. The meaning of that has a deep progressive content.

Of course, the army, the *feloul* and the liberal elements say « We're all one » and « We all have the same interests. » But that's not really the same as that sense of unity I'm talking about. When those who lead the movement and the revolutionaries who want change are saying, « We're for all Egyptians, » they mean this as a solidarity among ordinary Egyptians—as opposed to « We represent Muslims only. »

In that sense, it's a way to say, « This revolution stands for the freedoms and rights of all of us, not just some of us. » That's a tremendously important breakthrough—to return to this kind of impulse, rather than sectarian violence and rivalry, or the narrow pursuit of the interests of one or another political party.

**OVER 50 years, the Muslim Brotherhood built a base of support and a level of influence that enabled it to project itself into a position of political leadership after Mubarak's fall. But in a year, that has all come undone. What does this mean for the Brotherhood and for Egypt generally ?**

IT'S DIFFICULT to predict anything. First of all, what will happen to the Muslim Brotherhood ? It's a force—it was the third force in Egyptian politics. If Egypt's capitalist and political class was one pole and the army was another, the Muslim Brotherhood was the third. It would be leaned on for some things, and it would be opposed on others. Those three poles of influence still exist—and now the open question is about the state and who's politically represented within it.

Then you have the remnants of the old regime, the *feloul*, who are organizing as well. But because of the dictatorial conditions under Mubarak, none of these forces are clearly and well organized into political groupings. There really is a lack of legitimacy for any number of those groups. So one of the things I foresee is a flurry of new parties and new alliances, as there was a year and a half ago when the previous political system took shape.

But I also think that people have learned an awful lot from what they did or didn't do during that time.

I think that the most important challenge will be finding some way to give political and organizational expression to aspects of the movement. The aim here is not simply to campaign for office at the presidential or parliamentary level, but for organizations to contest for political space right now, and to make sure that the movement isn't pushed back. I think the coming months in Egypt will be very interesting to follow and full of surprises.

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\* <http://socialistworker.org/2013/07/05/all-of-egypt-is-tahrir>