

Striking Back at Egyptian Workers

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Mainstream narratives of the ongoing 2011 Egyptian revolution center around a “crisis of the state.” Among the elements of the crisis were the utter failure of top-down political reform, as shown in the shamelessly rigged 2010 legislative elections; mounting corruption and repression; emerging opportunities for collective action offered by networking sites like Facebook and Twitter; and the advent of neoliberal economic policies and the resulting constraints on the state’s capacity to deliver on its traditional obligations, such as social services, subsidies, price controls and guaranteed employment for college graduates. There is considerable consensus that the revolution is — at least in part — a backlash against the exclusionary economic order that the deposed president’s son Gamal Mubarak and his associates helped to erect over the last decade. Yet it remains unclear if the new, post-Mubarak Egypt can succeed in addressing the socio-economic grievances that helped to spark the January 25 uprising.

The prevailing discourse among Egyptian elites and opinion makers, however, already signals that the answer is no. The ambivalent, if not hostile, rhetoric directed toward demands for more humane standards of living points to the potential for continuity in the highly uneven economic order. While most believe that there will be no return to the pre-January 25 political system, even if post-Mubarak Egypt is not fully democratic, workers may continue to be marginalized by the economic liberalization begun under the previous regime.

Let the Wheel Turn

Shortly after the resignation of Husni Mubarak on February 11, Egypt witnessed the rise of what Egyptian authorities and media outlets began describing as ihtijajat fi’awiyya or small-group protests. The Arabic term fi’a simply means “group,” but has acquired negative connotations and might be compared with how the term “special interest” is used to disparage American labor. In post-Mubarak Egypt, officials have used its adjectival form fi’awi in reference to any demonstration, strike or sit-in advancing demands related to distribution of wealth, whether the protesters are blue- or white-collar employees, and whether they are calling for higher wages, greater benefits, improved working conditions or replacement of corrupt management personnel. The term’s recent usage seems to encompass the public and private sectors and to apply to collective action as limited as a protest in a single state-owned enterprise and as broad as a national strike by disgruntled members of a professional syndicate.

Over the past two months, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, state officials and other elites have — wittingly or not — built a consensus around a narrative that condemns this class of political

action and designates it a challenge to Egypt's future security. Only three days after Mubarak's resignation, the Supreme Council released Communiqué 5, which outlines the negative impact of continuing protests on the economy and calls on labor and professional syndicates to help bring about a return to normalcy in everyday life. [1] A few days later, an army statement described "fi'awi demands" as illegitimate, pledging to deal with the agitators through legal means in the name of "protecting the security of the nation and its citizens." On March 23, the government of Prime Minister 'Isam Sharaf approved a law banning protests, assemblies and strikes that impede private and public business, and rendering such actions punishable with up to a year in prison and a fine that could reach a half-million Egyptian pounds.

Vocal figures outside of government have also taken a leading role in denouncing labor actions. Two days after the release of Communiqué 5, the Muslim Brothers' spokesman Essam El-Erian accused fi'awi protests of undermining national consensus and expressed "understanding" for the army's point of view. [2] Usama Haykal, editor-in-chief of the liberal Wafd Party's daily, warned that the demonstrations could "destroy" the gains of the revolution. In March, a group of correspondents in al-Fayyoun announced that they would not cover fi'awi demonstrations because "while legal, they are poorly timed." [3] In April, Egypt's grand mufti, 'Ali Gum'a, went so far as to say that "instigators of fi'awi demonstrations violate the teachings of God." [4]

The dangers of fi'awi demands are said to be three. First, the workers who make them are accused of seeking to exploit the revolution to serve their own financial interest. Wahid 'Abd al-Magid of the al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies has articulated this perspective on a number of televised occasions, chiding labor protesters for slaving away in silence for 30 years and then choosing a moment of crisis to press their case. Mainstream portrayals usually draw a contrast with the Tahrir Square gatherings that preceded the downfall of Mubarak, juxtaposing the selfless motives of Tahrir to fi'awi protests that put particular agendas ahead of the greater good. According to the columnist Khalid Muntasir, "Tahrir demonstrations raised a political slogan, 'The people want to bring down the regime.' All the slogans revolved around the meaning of freedom, as demonstrators set aside their fi'awi demands and summoned forth the spring of liberty. They did not ask for a raise or a bonus. They looked at the wider context and at the nation as a whole. The contagion of narrow viewpoints did not spread among them, as it did among those who engaged in continuous, hysterical and vengeful fi'awi demonstrations." [5]

Second, bread-and-butter demands are presented as a major challenge to Egypt's economic prosperity and, therefore, national security. Finance Minister Samir Radwan claims that fi'awi demonstrations have cost the treasury 7 billion Egyptian pounds and the tourism sector 13.5 billion — making them largely responsible for Egypt's budget deficit and decline in foreign direct investment. Critics of strikes regularly invoke the expression "the wheel of production must turn" as a means of telling protesters to go back to work. Supreme Council head Field Marshal Husayn Tantawi himself sounded this note in one of his few public appearances. Similarly, a week after Mubarak's resignation, prominent salafi preacher Muhammad Hassan used the phrase in calling for an end to strikes and sit-ins. Even opinion makers who proclaim sympathy with the strikers' demands often defer to elite consensus on this point. "Despite the legitimacy of these demands," wrote journalist and talk show host Lamis al-Hadidi, "I believe that this is not the time for settling accounts or self-interest. Now Egypt must come first and this is not simply a slogan.... Now the wheel must turn." [6] Interestingly, during the lead-up to the March 19 constitutional referendum those who advocated the "yes" vote also referred to "turning the wheel of production" to argue that approving the amendments would help bring normalcy to the country's economic life.

Third, so-called fi'awi protests, the narrative goes, take their cues from affiliates of the formerly ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) stirring up trouble to reverse the gains of the revolution. Eight days after Mubarak's resignation, unidentified "informed sources" told al-Misri al-Yawm that

three former regime figures were behind the “fi’awi demonstrations” in the state sector. [7] The same week, the official news website of the Muslim Brothers reported that NDP members were inciting labor unrest, citing an unidentified source claiming that a dentist who held a leading position in the former ruling party had been calling on his colleagues to stage demonstrations. Government officials have corroborated claims of NDP involvement in inciting these activities, though they have yet to present any concrete evidence to back up the allegations. In March, Justice Minister Muhammad al-Gindi said that labor demonstrations are not spontaneous but a manifestation of an organized “counter-revolution” staged by remnants of the old regime. As the spring wore on, and sectarian tensions began to preoccupy the national political debate, it became standard practice for pundits and commentators to list fi’awi protests together with sectarian strife as the two main channels through which forces of darkness are attempting to undermine the January 25 revolution.

Convenient Omissions

What is most striking about the conventional narrative of fi’awi protests is not what it reveals, but rather what it conceals. While media reports take for granted the premise that “fi’awi protests” emerged after Mubarak’s ouster, what is new is not the phenomenon but the terminology. Labor strikes, demonstrations and sit-ins have been on the rise in Egypt for a good part of the last decade. According to the Land Center for Human Rights, the number of labor protests in Egypt rose from 222 in 2006 to 756 in 2007 and exceeded 700 in 2009. Stated differently, well before January 25, 2011 the victims of economic liberalization among workers and civil servants had been loudly voicing their grievances, sometimes in highly visible locations, such as before the parliamentary building in downtown Cairo. Interestingly, the end of 2010 witnessed a number of high-profile strikes that were similar in character to what were later described as fi’awi actions, but the stigmatizing term fi’awi was rarely invoked. One prominent example is the weeks-long strike by cargo truck drivers in December 2010, just two months before Mubarak’s ouster. Strikers were protesting new laws that, among other things, raised taxes and imposed hefty fines on truckers for carrying excess cargo. Because many industries relied on truckers for transportation of their raw materials and products, the strike imposed massive economic losses on the government and many businesses, and threatened to raise prices of basic food items and construction and agricultural material. The strike resulted in daily losses of 500 million Egyptian pounds, according to the Land Transportation Association. The stakes for key economic sectors were not negligible, given that the strike effectively froze significant imports and exports, as many companies that rely on truckers were unable to transport shipments from and to ports. Despite these serious economic repercussions, however, there was no talk among opposition elites of the urgent need to “turn the wheel of production” or for the strikers to set aside their demands for the sake of economic security. Instead, the blame was placed almost entirely on the incompetence of former Prime Minister Ahmad Nazif’s government in dealing with the dire situation. For example, while acknowledging the severe impact of the strike on Egypt’s economy, a former parliamentarian belonging to the Muslim Brothers criticized the government for dealing with the striking truckers in a “pedestrian way.” In fact, some NDP members openly blamed the government for the impasse and supported the strikers’ position. [8] Five weeks before the January 25 uprising, the Popular Campaign to Support Mohamed ElBaradei, the Nobel laureate and opposition politician, described the strike as “an inspirational lesson” that showed how “Egyptians can in fact change their current conditions if they really want to.” The national consensus was so favorable to the strikers that Ahmad ‘Izz, the infamous businessman and ruling-party boss, complained of unreasonable bias toward truckers who were refusing to abide by the law. [9]

The absence of criticism of the limited character of these strikes, despite the serious challenge they

posed to Egypt's economy, is quite revealing. While job actions were an important part of contentious politics in pre-January 25 Egypt, they were not demonized as *fi'awi* protests. Before the release of the army's Communiqué 5, the mainstream media relied on terms like "demands-based protests" (*ihitajat matlabiyya*) or labor sit-ins (*i'tisamat 'ummaliyya*) when discussing worker unrest. Yet the sudden proliferation of the phrase "*fi'awi* demands" in post-Mubarak Egypt began to obscure the long-standing nature of the grievances in question. Perplexed by the backlash, prominent blogger 'Ala' Sayf al-Islam wrote on May Day: "Although labor strikes and demonstrations have been on the rise since 2006 and have not stopped since, and even though workers played an important role in bringing down Mubarak, we find the term '*fi'awiyya*' being used as an insult. And suddenly we find that demands for just wages and respectable working conditions are portrayed as selfish.... Others go so far as to portray the strikes of Egyptian workers and employees as part of the counter-revolution and a conspiracy by the National Democratic Party." [10]

The Illusion of Parochialism

By reinforcing the impression that the demands of discontented workers for more humane wages and working conditions are the mere product of parochial employee-management disputes inside various factories and bureaucracies, the term *fi'awi* does more than just stigmatize and dehistoricize these demands. Characterizing so-called *fi'awi* claims as the sum of a variety of disjointed narrow interests masks the serious national economic problems that these demonstrations and sit-ins collectively underscore.

The illusion of parochialism perhaps stems from the way that labor actions appear as chaotic efforts isolated from one another and from any national political agenda. The fragmentation of these efforts, however, is not an expression of insularity as much as it is a reflection of the long-standing absence of meaningful national advocacy for Egyptian workers' rights. For decades, the state-controlled Egyptian Trade Union Federation enjoyed a legally sanctioned monopoly over the formal representation of workers and did more to rein in its members at the state's behest than to lobby on their behalf. At the level of elite politics under Mubarak, there was scant opportunity to channel the needs of Egyptian workers into a coherent platform because licensed opposition parties that claimed to speak for labor, like the Tagammu' Party, were dominated by regime allies who sought to keep workers quiet. There has been some progress in overcoming this challenge, including the founding of the Independent Federation for Egyptian Workers in January and the formation of new parties proclaiming commitment to labor rights. Such efforts, however, remain a work in progress.

Meanwhile, the fact that workers' protests and sit-ins are disconnected from each other does not reduce the problem at hand to a set of opportunistic attempts at rent seeking by special interests. The problem, first and foremost, is a national one, stemming from the failure of the state to deal with rising prices of basic goods such that a significant segment of Egyptian society remains stuck in a constant struggle to make ends meet. With inflation rates in recent years reaching levels unprecedented since the early 1990s and 40 percent of Egyptians living on less than \$2 per day, the visible signs of socio-economic discontent, which so-called *fi'awi* protests epitomize, are not surprising. In fact, labor unrest is not the only expression of hardship: Riots over shortages in subsidized bread were widely reported in 2008 when bread sold at private bakeries became virtually unaffordable to many Egyptians after its price increased fivefold.

The continuing decline in quality and quantity of state social services has forced many families to spend a good chunk of their paychecks on services that Egyptians used to take for granted, such as health care and education. For example, it is estimated that Egyptian families spend 10-15 billion Egyptian pounds per year on private tutoring in order to compensate for the shortcomings of formal

instruction at public and private schools. [11] Estimates show that two thirds of schoolchildren in Egypt are privately tutored and 60 percent of families that rely on these services spend at least one third of their incomes on the lessons. [12] It is not surprising, therefore, to observe chronic expressions of grievances revolving around the inadequacy of wages to keep up with rising prices and the cost of living. Further inflaming these grievances are frequent reports about the extreme disparity in pay across management and junior staff within individual organizations, notably in the banking sector, where angry employees have objected. [13] The proliferation of the term *fi'awi* and its supporting assumptions diverts attention from the need for inclusive deliberation upon the urgent economic problems that touch people's everyday lives. The unreflective deference that many opinion makers have awarded to "the wheel of production" helps to sideline these pressing concerns even as millions of Egyptians are crushed under the wheel's grinding rotation. A lonely dissenting voice appeared in an opinion piece titled "The People Want Another Wheel of Production" by al-Shurouq writer Wa'il Gamal: "Egyptians have revolted to replace the old wheel of production because it is oppressive and creates poverty, ignorance and illness." [14]

In other words, the surge in worker unrest following Mubarak's resignation highlights the extent to which labor rights had deteriorated during the preceding years of crony capitalism. Mass layoffs and slashing of wages and benefits took place during the post-2004 rush toward economic liberalization under the Nazif government, particularly in the privatization of public-sector enterprises. More and more workers are contingent and temporary: It is estimated that in 2010 3 million Egyptians were employed under contractual arrangements that give their employers the *de facto* right to dismiss them at any moment. One common practice is to compel new employees literally to sign a "resignation letter" at the outset of their employment. The absence of benefits such as health insurance in these contracts is quite alarming, since temporary employment is most concentrated in fields involving high-risk physical labor, including the agriculture, construction and mining sectors. [15] Years if not decades ago, many Egyptians decided to enter into these insecure contractual arrangements in the state sector and put up with monthly salaries not exceeding 100 Egyptian pounds in the hope that eventually they would be hired as full-time state employees, affording them a higher salary, more benefits and — someday — a pension check. While the government has announced steps to grant temporary workers full employment rights in state agencies, much is yet to be done to address the difficulty that millions of Egyptian employees face due to the state's ambivalence. The grievances of temporary employees, moreover, are but a sample of a broader problem in which considerable sectors of the economy are untouched by laws regulating labor rights. For example, the government's decision in 2010 to raise the monthly minimum wage from its 1984 level of 35 to 400 Egyptian pounds, slightly above the poverty line at \$67, was meaningless from the perspective of the 7 million Egyptians (including half the women in the work force) who work in the informal economy outside the reach of government scrutiny.

In the aforementioned May Day column, there was a powerful list of ordinary people from all walks of life enduring hardship: a "big-shot engineer with a masters degree" who had to sign a resignation letter on her first day of work; a high-school mathematics teacher of 18 years who "still rides a Vespa motorbike" and "would die of hunger" without the supplemental income from private tutoring; an assistant manager at a Kentucky Fried Chicken store who works from 9 am until 10 pm every day; a Ministry of Health doctor whose pension after a 30-year term of service was 900 pounds (\$151); women who get only three months' maternity leave. These people are not unlike the protesters dismissed in the press as selfish, except that many of the "*fi'awi* demonstrators" are even more beleaguered.

Finally, the popular assertion that labor unrest is at the root of Egypt's post-Mubarak economic woes, as Egyptian officials often allege, is unpersuasive, to say the least. Official claims that an end to *fi'awi* protests would immediately steer foreign direct investment and tourists back to the Nile

ignores the lawlessness following the disappearance of police from the streets during the January 25 uprising; the uncertainty of Egypt's political future; sectarian tensions; travel advisories issued by foreign governments; and the inconvenience of living under curfew and martial law.

Rewriting History

Opinion makers who have popularized the term “fi’awi demands” seem to be participating in writing an unusually selective historical account of the unfinished January 25 revolution.

In response to public outcry over the government's decision to ban strikes and demonstrations, Prime Minister Sharaf told journalists in March that the purpose of the new law is to protect the revolution from fi’awi demonstrations. A week later, a political activist told a newspaper that Sharaf assured the Coalition of the Youth of the Revolution that the new law would not infringe upon their right to convene the mass demonstrations they usually hold in Tahrir Square almost every Friday. [16] Implicit in the government's approach is that the Tahrir rallies are an extension of the revolution, whereas labor demonstrations referred to as fi’awi support counter-revolution. The dichotomy drawn in these government statements reinforces the belief that demands for distributive justice played a limited role in bringing about Mubarak's demise. This claim, while common, is flawed for three main reasons.

First, the month of January before the uprising witnessed an intensification of labor demonstrations and strikes. Whether these activities provided the impetus for mass participation in the uprising warrants further investigation, but at least these trends show that many signs of public discontent revolved around redistributive demands immediately before the uprising — let alone years before it. A few examples of these activities include: a sit-in by 1,500 Mansoura University Hospital workers who demanded permanent employment after having worked more than 15 years as temporary employees; a strike of 300 workers in a wood factory in Dashna in demand of unpaid wages; a strike by 20 percent of the railway workshop employees in Cairo; a strike by 200 nurses and X-ray technicians at Ashmoun hospital in protest of slashed benefits; and a sit-in by al-Karakat Company workers in Ismailiyya and Port Said in protest of disparities in working hours among employees. [17]

Second, working-class regions like Mahalla and Suez that had undergone major labor unrest saw demonstrations of thousands during the January 25 uprising, not to mention intense battles with security forces. This fact indicates that redistributive demands later characterized as fi’awi played a role in moving the masses in support of the revolution. It also suggests that workers have participated in the uprising, albeit as individuals and not as organized labor, as leading labor historian Joel Beinin and others have argued. [18] Even though it is not possible to evaluate the role of redistributive demands precisely, the wide distance that certain opinion makers project between the revolution and calls for humane standards of living seems at the very least overblown. It is one thing to argue that demonstrators set aside their socio-economic demands and rallied behind a unified message calling on Mubarak to step down. It is another thing to argue that economic hardships were irrelevant to why people chose to take to the streets in the first place.

Third, the understandable focus of media reports on Tahrir Square and the cross-class unity there must not detract from the importance of labor unrest outside of the major squares during Mubarak's final days. For example, after businesses reopened on February 7 for the first time since January 28, workers' strikes and demonstrations became widespread throughout the governorates of Egypt. The demands of these protests were not unlike the “fi’awi demands” that many rushed to condemn shortly after February 11. Signs of labor unrest that occurred on February 9, one day before the Supreme Council released its first communiqué, include: demonstrations by thousands of workers in

Helwan, Kafr al-Dawwar and Kafr al-Zayyat; a demonstration by temporary employees in front of the General Authority of Health Insurance building in Cairo in demand of permanent employment; a demonstration by over 500 employees of the Red Crescent on behalf of temporary workers on provisional contracts for 20 years; a strike by the Boulaq railway workshop's workers who gathered to prevent trains from passing through; and a march by thousands of street cleaning personnel down Sudan Street in the Cairo neighborhood of Muhandisin to demand higher wages and better working conditions. [19]

Some close observers, like the activist and blogger Hossam El-Hamalawy, believe that labor strikes in the last week of the uprising were the tipping point that forced Mubarak's resignation. [20] There is no credible account as yet of the exact chain of events that pushed Mubarak out of office. Yet the fact that one of the first things the Supreme Council tried to do after taking power was to bring an end to strikes suggests that work stoppages were a source of deep concern for the generals who surrounded Mubarak in his last days. The claim that these activities hastened Mubarak's ouster is, therefore, quite plausible.

The proliferation of the term "fi'awi" to describe Egyptian workers' demands and reduce them to parochial, even counter-revolutionary interests is more than just a denial of the right to a humane living standard. There is more at stake than just the absurdity of the assumptions on which the usage of this term is based. The ubiquity of the term signifies a mounting elite consensus that is rewriting the history of the ongoing Egyptian revolution, its meaning and its goals — with the purpose of sidelining pressing socio-economic problems and the millions of Egyptians who suffer from them. While many believe that Egyptians revolted largely out of socio-economic discontent, the speed with which influential figures clung to the derogatory term fi'awi indicates that addressing these grievances in post-Mubarak Egypt — let alone putting them on the national political agenda — may not be as easy as one would have thought. It remains to be seen whether the emergence of new parties and independent unions and syndicates will give workers and their allies among advocates of distributive justice a shot at countering this wave of unreflective elitism. But, in any event, the trends suggest that what awaits Egyptian workers after the end of a decades-long bad romance with Mubarak's authoritarianism is not a happy ending, but new challenges and greater uncertainty.

Hesham Sallam

Endnotes

[1] The statement appears online at: <http://www.sis.gov.eg/Ar/Story.aspx?sid=44125>.

[2] Al-Misri al-Yawm, February 16, 2011.

[3] Al-Wafd, March 9, 2011.

[4] Al-Yawm al-Sabi', April 1, 2011.

[5] Khalid Muntasir, "Tahrir Contagion," al-Misri al-Yawm, March 4, 2011. [Arabic]

[6] Lamis al-Hadidi, "Good Morning, O Country," al-Misri al-Yawm, February 15, 2011. [Arabic]

[7] Al-Misri al-Yawm, February 20, 2011.

[8] Al-Yawm al-Sabi', January 11, 2011.

[9] Al-Misri al-Yawm, December 29, 2010.

- [10] Quoted in Bilal Fadl, "When Will the Workers Win?" al-Misri al-Yawm, May 1, 2011. [Arabic]
- [11] Ahmed Zewail, "Reflections on Arab Renaissance," Cairo Review of Global Affairs (Spring 2011).
- [12] Al-Ahram, September 21, 2011.
- [13] Al-Ahram, April 28, 2011.
- [14] Wa'il Gamal, "The People Want Another Wheel of Production," al-Shurouq, April 26, 2011. [Arabic]
- [15] Al-Misri al-Yawm, October 22, 2010.
- [16] Al-Dustour al-Asli, April 6, 2011.
- [17] See <http://www.id3m.com> for a full list of news stories about labor protests in Egypt since December 2010.
- [18] Joel Beinin, "Egypt's Workers Rise Up," The Nation, March 7, 2011.
- [19] The full list is in Husayn 'Abd al-Wahid, Thawrat Misr: 18 yawman hazzat al-'alam (Cairo: Dar Akhbar al-Yawm), pp. 50-54.
- [20] "Interview with Hossam El-Hamalawy," Jadaliyya, April 9, 2011.
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P.S.

* Middle East Research and Information Project. published in MER259, Volume: 41, Summer 2011:
<http://www.merip.org/mer/mer259/striking-back-egyptian-workers>