

Egypt: Strangers in the Crowd - “revolutionaries stand by themselves facing the storm”

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“The system of fear is back,” whispers an Egyptian political activist. “It is showing its teeth, saying ‘I’m baaack.’” The protest veteran speaks sotto voce even though he is sitting in his living room. And that, he points out, is the biggest change since the heady days of 2011, after the fall of Hosni Mubarak, and even since the more somber times of 2012 and 2013.

Even at home, this activist feels weighed down by an atmosphere heavy with apprehension and outright pessimism. (All names of persons interviewed for this piece are withheld for their safety.) The fervent hopes of the immediate post-Mubarak era are dashed, and to many observers Egypt’s political scene is darker than under the deposed dictator. The political space that opened up over the last four years is shrinking again, and public opinion has largely turned not only against the Society of Muslim Brothers, the *bête noire* of the new order, but also against the forces that sought to make a revolution out of Mubarak’s overthrow.

Revolutionaries — those who took seriously the 2011 uprising’s call for “bread, freedom and social justice” — are vilified in the Egyptian media as foreign agents intent on ruining the nation. Leftist and liberal activists are used to the opprobrium. For much of 2011 and 2012, the ruling junta of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) labeled them as thugs and thieves. After the Muslim Brothers took power in mid-2012, the Islamist-led government portrayed revolutionary protesters as spies, unbelievers and prostitutes.

The difference now appears to be that revolutionaries stand by themselves facing the storm. The April 6 movement, with its links to organized labor, is now illegal. The Muslim Brothers, occasional allies in the past, are outlaws, too, rounded up or driven back underground. Most important of all, the masses are gone from the streets, and now they want the streets clear of disruptive marches and rallies. As one activist put it: “There is no point in public activism now. We will go to jail alone. And there, we will simply rot away alone.”

Alaa Abd El Fattah, Ahmad Douma, Ahmad Mahir, Sanaa Seif, Yara Sallam and Mahienour El Massry — a who’s who of contemporary Egyptian activism — are all in jail for violating the draconian protest law (in addition to trumped-up charges such as assaulting a police officer, spreading chaos, vandalizing public property and incitement to violence). These men and women are on hunger strike in a desperate attempt to make their voices heard. All the while, the order led by President ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi allows corrupt Mubarak family associates such as Ahmad ‘Izz back onto the political and economic stage. The blatant injustices leave a bitter taste in many mouths.

The revolutionaries are also disappointed in themselves. As one activist puts it, “We failed. We failed to organize. We failed to formulate viable alternatives that spoke to people’s direct needs and desires. We failed to unite on a social and political program, and instead there was internal bickering. The revolutionary movement was split and fragmented.”

Internal squabbles have indeed posed an obstacle. Yet external pressures should not be underestimated. Whether the military (backed by Mubarak-era remnants, the fuloul) or the Muslim Brothers, the revolutionary activists' opponents could bring the resources of a state to bear. The authorities strove to quash the activist impulse with measures ranging from military tribunals and the infamous "virginity tests" (justified by SCAF spokesman Sisi) to prosecution for "insulting the president" and open torture.

But, again, according to the activists, the difference is that the public now looks the other way. One can only speculate as to why. Perhaps the idea of change is now associated with Mursi, who many Egyptians saw as an authoritarian trying to impose a particular Islamist identity upon the entire nation. Egyptians are also tired of the rollercoaster ride of the last four years, one that has seen more downs than ups. The economy is in dire straits; the health system is on its knees; education is in desperate need of reform; transport and traffic are a constant source of stress; and now electricity cuts of unprecedented scale add to the aggravation. The rhetoric of stability and security taps into a deep desire for normalcy.

The price of normalcy may be the vibrancy of political life. As the public looks the other way, citizens are imprisoned, tortured and killed on a daily basis in the name of "fighting terrorism" and "national security." Yet for most Egyptians the numbers of dead remain just that — numbers. Perhaps the war-on-terror propaganda works. Perhaps people are simply traumatized and cannot take any more misery.

For a few activists, turning away from politics is not an option, despite the huge personal costs: "The revolution grabbed me, and I cannot stop. I cannot turn back. I am emotionally imprisoned by it. I am the last one of my circle outside of jail, and I know I will go, too. The question is not if but when." Many others, like the public at large, turn inward, away from the public sphere. As one young activist puts it, "Politics is a very bad investment in Egypt. It carries severe repercussions with regard to money, time and effort. You cannot even get a 5 percent return on the emotional investment you put into politics. So now I am trying to move away from my addiction, and listen to music, talk about different stuff and develop a new discourse with those around me."

The cross-ideological ties of the late Mubarak years are badly frayed. An April 6 leader says: "We used to be in dialogue with the Islamist youth. But now, because of the frustration and rage with the current regime, they no longer listen and talk to us. We cannot control them anymore."

Meanwhile, there are ominous developments in the region that may make Sisi look like the least bad option, both in Egypt and abroad. The beheadings carried out by the so-called Islamic State, the bombings of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis — such acts may not only burnish Sisi's anti-terrorist credentials, but also make his regime's transgressions look less severe. Not surprisingly, a number of activists insinuate that militant groups like Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis were purposely created by the Egyptian state itself. After all, such groups facilitate the depiction of the region as embroiled in a zero-sum war between authoritarian rulers and Islamist radicals, the very dichotomy that served Mubarak and his ilk so well for so long even as it risked becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. We might never know the reality behind these groups. The problem, however, persists. As one activist states it, "The terrorist state creates more terrorists, and there is nothing we can do about it."

There is a renewed crackdown on civil society, which the media also accuses of working on behalf of "foreign elements." Civil society organizations have grown since the 2011 uprising, and sought to hold the government to account through the publication of reports and commentaries in both English and Arabic, as well as lawsuits and popular mobilizations. Many Egyptian NGOs are registered as profitmaking law firms to avoid falling under the control of the Ministry of Social Solidarity, which grants licenses only to charitable organizations focused on social welfare and

development. Through this loophole, the government can close down organizations that it believes engage in political activity with funding from foreign donors. NGOs faced similar challenges under the SCAF and Mursi — including the closure of unregistered NGOs in December 2011. Now all such entities face a deadline of November 10 to register with the ministry (and thereafter cease political activity) if they wish to avoid closure and prosecution. This measure comes after raids on NGO headquarters and personal threats to employees, many of whom now avoid the office.

As this campaign of repression proceeded, Human Rights Watch published a highly critical report on the August 2013 killings at Raba'a and al-Nahda squares. The report accused the Egyptian state (and Sisi personally) of premeditating the murder of at least 817 protesters during the dispersal of occupations of the squares. In turn, the regime insisted that Human Rights Watch cooperated with a terrorist organization (the Muslim Brothers) and violated state sovereignty, as it conducted its investigations unregistered in Egypt. Police arrested a key witness cited in the report, Muhammad Tariq, a professor from Alexandria, and the authorities barred Human Right Watch staff from re-entering Egypt.

Some Egyptian human rights activists, though critical of the Mursi government, believe that "Raba'a is the last card we have. We don't have other options. It is the only way that we can expose the true face of the Egyptian state." These activists are urging the European Human Rights Council to condemn Egypt for flagrant abuses. Such a determination would send a strong message not only to the Egyptian state but also to the dissident forces, who now feel more alone than ever.

Of course, attacks on civil society and human rights activists are not new in Egypt, but the public backing for this latest crackdown has a particularly demoralizing effect. For instance, it is easy to retort that the biggest recipient of foreign funding is the state itself — whether the annual \$1.3 billion in US military hardware or the increasingly large loans and investments from rich Gulf countries. But, in the current political climate, those who make such arguments are swimming against the tide. As one activist sums up, "We have to go into hibernation, to regroup and reflect on all that has gone wrong over the last three years. Then, hopefully, one day we can reemerge stronger."

Is the hope misplaced? It often seems so, yet the cracks in the Egyptian order are so evident that they cannot forever be hidden under the carpet of national security. Social, economic and political conditions in Egypt are deteriorating, creating the potential for unrest. The question as always is whether the state can contain the disturbance, and what will happen if it fails.

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