

ROUNDTABLE

A new turning point in Egypt

Saturday 8 December 2012, by [ALI Mostafa](#), [SHAWKI Ahmed](#) (Date first published: 7 December 2012).

Egypt is in the grips of a new rebellion as President Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood head toward a confrontation with the masses of people who oppose them.

Morsi, who earlier this year won the first presidential vote since the fall of the dictator Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, has attempted to cement his presidency and the political domination of the Muslim Brotherhood with: first, a decree that dramatically expanded his powers; and second, a snap referendum, set for December 15, on a draft constitution that would consolidate Islamism as the dominant political force in the country.

On Tuesday, December 4, hundreds of thousands of people joined a pro-democracy demonstration that marched to the presidential palace to denounce Morsi's power grab. The next day, the Muslim Brotherhood counter-attacked, mobilizing thousands of its hard-line supporters to attack activists sitting in outside the presidential palace.

Now, Egypt is balanced on a knife's edge, with Morsi vowing on national television Thursday night to press ahead with the referendum, even as members of his government have resigned in protest and the rebellion spreads to wider sections of the population.

On Thursday, SocialistWorker.org spoke with Mostafa Ali and Ahmed Shawki in Cairo to get their analysis of the latest developments. Mostafa Ali is a journalist and member of Egypt's Revolutionary Socialists; Ahmed Shawki is editor of the *International Socialist Review*.

Ahmed Shawki: This is a phrase that's used a lot, but it's clear that we've reached another stage in the Arab Spring. What we've seen in just a very short period here is the enormous growth of opposition to the very recently elected government of Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the expression of that opposition in mass protests.

One year ago, parliamentary elections were underway that were won by the Peace and Justice Party, the political wing of the Brotherhood, and by other Islamist parties. Half a year ago, Morsi won the presidency. And now, what's taking place is a rejection of Morsi and the Brotherhood by wide layers of Egypt's population.

The speed of the developments is very fast. On November 22, Morsi issued a decree that expanded his powers enormously. There were some parts of the decree that were designed to make it seem like Morsi was on the side of the revolution—like firing the hated top prosecutor from the Mubarak era. But the main thrust was to place his authority and the government's authority—as well as the Constituent Assembly writing a new constitution for Egypt—beyond the control of the judiciary or

anyone else.

Then, Morsi upped the stakes. The Constituent Assembly delivered its draft constitution, and Morsi declared there would be a national referendum in just two week's time.

But there is very widespread resentment against what is clearly a power grab by the Muslim Brotherhood and its allies, and this is finding expression throughout the country, which has led to the re-entry of very large numbers of people into protest against the government. This isn't just in the urban areas that had expressed significant support for some of the secular candidates in the presidential election, like Hamdeen Sabahi, but more broadly.

Mostafa Ali: The anger against the Brotherhood isn't only in the major centers of the revolution, Cairo and Alexandria. One new phenomenon of the past few weeks is that the outrage is growing in rural areas and provincial cities that have been strongholds of the Brotherhood.

Protests, for the most part, have been spontaneous actions. There have been attacks on Muslim Brotherhood headquarters a number of times in Alexandria, on the Suez Canal, in the cities of Ismailia and Suez, in the Northern Delta and other places.

Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood didn't expect the level of reaction that has taken place, especially in the last three days.

I think they were probably carried away by an unfounded level of confidence in their ability to ram through anything. They came out of negotiating the Gaza cease-fire with Israel believing they were invincible, and that they could take what seemed like a victory for Egyptian foreign policy and use it domestically to consolidate their power. There are many reports, in fact, that Morsi made the decree with the approval of the U.S.—and specifically with the approval of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

I don't think they expected the numbers that poured into the streets. On Tuesday, they were taken aback when hundreds of thousands of people marched on the presidential palace. And then, on Wednesday, they brought in a few thousand Brotherhood goons to break up a peaceful protest that they thought would be a couple dozen demonstrators. They thought it would demoralize the opposition.

In fact, the exact opposite happened. The mobilization against the Brotherhood attack was in the thousands. These demonstrators outnumbered the Brotherhood initially and fought the goons in street battles for hours and hours. The Brotherhood had to bring in reinforcements from around the city to hold the palace.

Ahmed: One very clear expression of the rejection of Morsi was the decision of 11 privately owned newspapers in the country to suspend publication on Tuesday against curtailments of freedom of expression that are expected as a consequence of the direction Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood are moving. Even the three government-run papers expressed these concerns. The journalists' union went on strike, and all the papers that did publish wrote that they're against dictatorship, against censorship and the like.

On Wednesday, the privately owned television stations did the same thing, including their associated websites—they broadcast no news content to send the message of opposition.

That decision by the TV stations was reversed in order to bring news of an attack on democracy protesters outside the presidential palace, which is outside the center of town and was once the home of Hosni Mubarak—today, it isn't Morsi's private home, but it's where the government

operates.

That the Muslim Brotherhood and some of its allied forces sent goons to bust up the sit-ins has caused shock and a great degree of polarization, because people were unaccustomed to seeing running street battles of this sort.

Wednesday wasn't like the January 25 revolution of last year, where masses of people demonstrated against the police or state. Instead, now, you have "Egyptian fighting Egyptian"—that's the kind of language people use to talk about how the Muslim Brotherhood sent in its forces to physically attack protesters.

Mostafa: Less than one month ago, Morsi's popularity and the Muslim Brotherhood's popularity was very high. The polls showed it at 70 percent; even if it wasn't that high, it was still significant. Many people who hadn't even voted for Morsi in June looked favorably on his promises before the elections and immediately after—promises of reform, improved living standards, social justice and fulfilling the demands of the revolution.

There were tremendous expectations and quite widespread popular support for Morsi, but in a matter of two or three months, that popular support dissipated.

The straw that broke the camel's back was Morsi's attempt to push an undemocratic constitution that tramples on the rights of workers, of peasants, of women and of Christians and oppressed minorities. The Constituent Assembly was dominated by the Islamists, they came up with a draft constitution that's what they wanted, and they told the liberal and left opposition to go screw themselves. And Morsi, meanwhile, decreed that the Constituent Assembly would be protected from dissolution by the courts.

In just the past two weeks, these issues really raised the level of disillusionment among a lot of people who you could call soft supporters of the Brotherhood—people who wanted to give the Brotherhood a chance, who had hopes in the Brotherhood's ability to bring about social and economic reform. Instead of social and economic reform, they discovered an autocratic dictatorial attempt to grab power and consolidate dominance.

Still, the situation was actually quite complicated, because while millions of people were beginning to be radicalized around this issue, small sections of the remnants of the Mubarak regime, especially among the judges, seemed to lead the movement. The Brotherhood at first attempted to categorize the broader opposition as revolutionaries with good intentions, but who are being fooled by the counter-revolutionary remnants of the old regime. There was a very harsh ideological attack on any attempt to oppose the power grab.

But what's become clear in the past two weeks is that the vast majority of the people who were going to Tahrir to protest and who were going on strike were not remnants of the Mubarak regime. In fact, many of these people had voted for Morsi, but they very quickly became disillusioned with him.

So the high level of optimism that the Brotherhood would deliver reform has very quickly turned into its opposite—and people recognize that the Brotherhood is not interested in reforming the system, in bringing about social justice, in redistributing wealth or even in keeping its promises to maintain a democratic civil state, not an Islamist state.

Ahmed: I want to underline this point. People are talking about the Muslim Brotherhood ruling in its own interests, and not in the interests of the nation. Today, I just ran into a demonstration in the street of a couple thousand young people chanting, "Morsi, Morsi, resign!" which is the same slogan

that was chanted against Mubarak.

That kind of comparison of Morsi to Mubarak would have been unheard of a few months ago, I think. Unheard of in the sense that the Muslim Brotherhood, whatever one may think of it, was extremely important in the defense of Tahrir Square during the January 25 revolution, especially the youth. And even though the Brotherhood leadership was slow to join the revolution, it still came out at the end of the day as the best organized political force in Egypt, with the most connections, the most political resources and so on.

But it's now understood that the Brotherhood is seeking to extend its own narrow interests.

The slogan of the young people at the demonstration today was: "For all of Egypt, one nation for all." That's not just some empty rhetoric. The social content beneath that slogan is about an Egypt that includes non-Brotherhood members, an Egypt that includes Copts.

Mostafa: One important development is that several million people have joined the demonstrations and strikes in the past two weeks who have never done so before. They're the people who sat out the January 25 revolution. There's a very funny name for them here in Egypt—they're called the "Party of the Couch." These are people who watched the revolution on television—who weren't necessarily against it, but who were scared by the specter of the chaos it might bring about.

So these are people who have been on the fence. Many of them might have actually supported the former ruling military council. But they're going to street demonstrations now, and they're not going in order to bring back the old regime. Their consciousness may not be as advanced as the people who fought on the street in the past two years, but it's developing quite rapidly and they're catching up in terms of the lessons of the past two years.

Overall, the movement is of people who have fought for two years, but it now involves newer layers of people who are moving in a radical direction because of the betrayals of the Muslim Brotherhood.

I want to make one point here—about the conclusions that many people who witnessed the events of the last days have drawn about the Brotherhood and its supposed organizational invincibility.

Many people believe this is a tightly controlled, fascist organization with hundreds of thousands of members, and if you try to mobilize against them, they'll crush you. But in the last few days, the numbers of people who were willing to protest and also to fight back against attacks by the Brotherhood have been astounding. People didn't believe they had the power to out-mobilize and build an opposition to the Islamists.

People were quite demoralized two months ago. Among those who wanted to finish the revolution to the end, there was a general sense of pessimism that the Brotherhood and the Islamists were all-powerful. But now, the discussions have changed, because we see we can actually build a massive opposition.

It may not be clear yet how this opposition will develop or who will lead it. Hamdeen Sabahi and Mohamed ElBaradei are currently at the head of the movement in an alliance with one of Mubarak's men, Amr Moussa, the former foreign minister under the dictatorship. This might change in the next few weeks because many people in the streets don't want the remnants of the old regime to be at the head of this movement.

They want to welcome new people who might have had reservations about the revolution, who might not have clearly support the revolution, but there is also a growing rejection of any association with the symbols of the old regime. So the nature of the opposition is a question that will work itself out

in the next few weeks.

Ahmed: I think Morsi's decree and the reaction against it have created an ideological crisis. Where the Brotherhood was once seen as trying through Islam to be the unitary factor in Egypt, now they're being seen as much narrower and sectionalist.

This morning, I went to a bookshop, and there was a Time magazine cover that read, "The most important man in the Middle East," with a picture of Mohamed Morsi—the man the Egyptian population is rising against!

Obviously, that cover was planned after the success in the Gaza cease-fire negotiations with Israel. But now we're seeing not just demonstrations, but journalists on television talking about Morsi's incompetence—asking how he could take an electoral victory and a foreign policy accomplishment, and then issue a decree that narrowly grabbed power for himself and the Brotherhood.

There's a loss of the veneer that the Brotherhood had created for itself as an organization with deep roots—the sense that the Brotherhood was there and would help, even when the Mubarak regime wouldn't, during disasters or crises. Now, it's being seen as in possession of all these powers, and it screws everything up, and nothing gets better.

In that situation, all kinds of social, political and economic questions get opened up, and we still haven't resolved the immediate one—which is that Morsi and the Brotherhood are insisting that they're going to ram through a vote on the constitution on December 15—against clear and obvious mass opposition.

So virtually any result is going to be tainted by this attempt to rush it through, and the legitimacy of the government has been called into question five months into Morsi's term. The way to deal with that, from the Brotherhood's point of view, can be seen in the comments of some officials in the government, who are basically raising the specter of the use of much broader armed physical force.

And that raises another important point about the character of the Muslim Brotherhood as an organization—which is that it's no longer just an organization. The Brotherhood has technical control over the state and has increased its connections in the army, which means it can use not just 5,000 or 10,000 or however many goons it has, but it can also call on the machinery of the state. That raises a conflict on a dramatically different level.

Yet you still have the intransigence of Morsi and his aides and spokespeople and the rest of the forces associated with him—in the face of what is clearly not a marginal secular left movement. They've clearly provoked a popular reaction where people are saying, "Wait a minute, have we replaced one dictator with another?"

The social content of that consciousness, whether it's new or not, is extremely radical in its direction. It can lead to cynicism, which I think explains some of the passivity of the past several months. But in a situation of a confrontation like what you saw yesterday, that question gets amplified in every cafe, in every university, in every workplace.

P.S.

* <http://socialistworker.org/2012/12/07/new-turning-point-in-egypt>

* Transcription by Rebecca Anshell Song and Sarah Levy.