

Egypt's revolution in a small town

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The return of millions to the streets of Egypt on 30 June follows months of rising social protest. Anne Alexander reports on the continuing revolution that is growing in strength well beyond Cairo's Tahrir Square.

Zaqaziq, the capital of Sharqiyya province in Egypt, is an unassuming town. The city is around an hour's drive from the capital Cairo and is surrounded by the lush green fields of the Nile Delta.

Yet it is in places like Zaqaziq, not only in Cairo's Tahrir Square, that the Egyptian Revolution is awakening new layers of the population to political life.

Revolutionary graffiti adorns the walls. The red, white and black murals of the Ultras, radical football fans, who have played a key role in street mobilisations, are everywhere.

There are stencilled slogans calling for strikes, freedom for political prisoners and solidarity with the workers' movement.

"Things are really changing in the provinces," said Ahmed, a law student at Zaqaziq University and an activist with the Revolutionary Socialists. "But even the revolutionaries still think that the revolution is only in Tahrir."

Before the revolution, the pace of political life was as sluggish as the river itself. "Most activists from Zagazig would travel to the capital if they wanted to be part of something", explained Hind Abd-al-Gawad, a trade unionist and Revolutionary Socialist activist.

"There was really nothing going on here at all."

Now new political parties are flourishing. The Revolutionary Socialists, the Constitution Party, Democratic Egypt, and the Popular Socialist Alliance have all recruited heavily among young people radicalised by the revolution. President Mohamed Mursi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, lives in a leafy street in the city.

"Last December we organised protests against the new constitution outside his home," said Ahmed. "Between two and three thousand came out into the streets."

Some Muslim Brotherhood activists embraced the revolution that has swept Egypt since 2011 and played a leading role in it. But its leadership, including Mursi, has tried to limit the struggle and clamp down on those fighting to win the revolution's demands.

"Every time there's a power cut, people blame Mursi," said Ahmed. "'Mursi destroyed the country' is a constant refrain in conversation."

A whole raft of broken promises has set the temperature rising among Egypt's poor. "We've begun going regularly to the poorest neighbourhoods of informal housing to campaign" said Ahmed.

"We stand in the streets with leaflets and banners, selling our paper and calling for the right to housing, gas and electricity. Recently local people have started coming to join us. They'll shout at activists from the Muslim Brotherhood if they try to bother us or tear up our papers."

The Revolutionary Socialists' attempts to sink roots in the informal neighbourhoods contrasts to the mainstream liberal opposition parties. "The liberals don't go to these poor areas" explained Ahmed "They are not interested in winning the people there, so the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists [conservative Islamists] dominate."

The revolution has also encouraged oppressed groups to organise. Over 100 disabled activists began a sit-in and camped out on the steps of the provincial government buildings last month.

Umran al-Khalifa, a law graduate who works as a teacher said, "The sit-in is because we have only temporary contracts. The government of Kamal al-Ganzouri made a decision in 2011 to offer disabled employees like us permanent jobs across the country.

"But the new local governor has refused to implement the decision."

Umran said that the change of policy reflects the priorities of the new Muslim Brotherhood administration in Cairo. "Both the new governor and his deputy are in the Brotherhood," he explained. "The deputy told me, 'If you join our party, I'll make sure you get a permanent job'."

Baton-wielding riot police stormed through their camp a few days before, dragging and beating the protesters, to try and end the sit-in.

"We were just sitting there peacefully when we were attacked," said Fatima Musa Halim, another activist. "Some thugs came and broke things, and said we caused the damage.

"Then the Central Security Forces troops hit me and dragged us away from the sit-in."

Fatima and her colleagues have no time for the Muslim Brotherhood's claim to represent a more virtuous form of politics "These people have no religion and no humanity", she said.

Mohammed, an administrator in the Sharqiyya Education department, summed up the mood of many on the sit-in. "I want to put the Minister of the Interior on trial for what the police did to us," he said.

He also says he is frustrated and angry with official representatives of disabled people, who have done nothing to help him and his colleagues. "The head of the National Council for People with Special Needs should resign," he said. "We have no confidence in this organisation."

Six protesters began a hunger strike inside the building. "Some of us have heart disease, some high blood pressure," said Mahmud Manazm, one of the hunger strikers.

"We want to know that the Egyptian police attacked disabled people, beat them on the head and dragged them in the street."

The sit-in is alive with tactical discussions and political arguments, despite the ever-present threat of repression.

Some of the disabled workers are nervous that the young revolutionary activists want to hijack their campaign. "We don't want trouble or politics" one man says in private.

Many others disagree, seeing a need to build alliances with the revolutionary groups. Hind and

Mona, a leading local activist with the liberal Constitution Party are discussing final practical arrangements for the next stage in the solidarity campaign with the sit-in.

The structures of the old state still loom menacingly over Egypt. But new revolutionary organisation and confidence is growing from below.

Anne Alexander

P.S.

* <http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art/33813/Egypt+revolution+in+a+small+town>