

Questions to Hany Hanna on the situation in Egypt

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Having lived for many years in France where he was especially a trade-union activist, Hany Hanna returned to live in his native Egypt after Mubarak's fall. He works there as a freelance journalist and translator. He was interviewed on October 9, 2013 by Alain Baron.

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On the Muslim Brotherhood

Alain Baron - How can we explain the rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2012?

Hany Hanna - By engaging in the struggle to “kick out” Mubarak, Egyptians clearly knew what they wanted: bread, freedom, social justice, dignity. But for the great mass of them, without knowing what were the tools and the political programmes most likely to achieve the objectives of the revolution. They had not been able to engage in political activity for 60 years and had to learn as they went along. This partly explains why when on 25 January 2011, the army did not open fire on the crowds, most Egyptians concluded that they could have confidence in it to ensure the transition to democracy and to achieve the other objectives of the revolution.

This was not the case, and during the 2012 elections, many Egyptians said to themselves that they had to “try out” the Muslim Brotherhood. It had never been in power and enjoyed some sympathy because it had suffered repression.

A misunderstanding exists about the electoral victory of the Brotherhood in 2012. Some people believed, and it was presented in this way in the media, that Egypt had fallen into Islamism. It was actually a question of “trying out” the Brotherhood. It was the most important organized political movement; moreover it organized social welfare on a significant scale. And most importantly, the Brotherhood used the fact that, as in many Arab countries, it is difficult to separate religion from morality. Many people said that since the Brotherhood were men of God, they had moral principles, which they would soon put into practice by carrying out policies of social justice. But that's not what happened.

Why did the social base of the Brotherhood erode so quickly?

In France, it is difficult to understand what the Muslim Brotherhood is. They are primarily presented as a political movement. But they are not only that. They are also a terrorist organization and a religious sect.

* The terrorism of the Brotherhood does not belong only to the past, especially to the 1940s and 50s. When they came to power in June 2012, it was said that they would fit into the democratic process and become a political movement like the others. But that was not the case: when the police sometimes refused to repress certain demonstrations as hard as the government wanted, the Brotherhood sent its militia to attack the demonstrators; there were injuries, deaths, abductions and torture.

* It is also a sect because they did not play the game of democracy: in a democracy, elected officials are accountable to voters. But it was found immediately after the arrival in power of Morsi that important decisions were taken immediately after the meetings of the Bureau of Guidance. There, the Guide plays the role of a guru, and takes major decisions. The Egyptians realized that it was not the elected officials who had power but the Guide, who is not elected by the people. * Simultaneously, there was no progress on social justice. On the contrary, prices soared, and there was no law on trade union freedoms, nor on the minimum and maximum wage. It is symbolic that half of the businessmen accompanying President Morsi to China were former supporters of the Mubarak regime and his party. This demonstrates the continuity between the ultra-liberal economic policies of Mubarak and Morsi. And this is what the people understood.

The outcome of all this was many waves of protest, the most important being the one on 30 June 2013. It took place on the initiative of the Tamarod (rebellion) movement, which had collected over 22 million signatures demanding the departure of Morsi, much higher than the 12 million who voted for him (to start with, the goal was only to exceed 12 million signatures!).

What was the number of demonstrators on 30 June 2013?

The Islamist government talked about 17 million demonstrators. The figure of 33 million comes from CNN, and it was calculated using images from Google Earth.

In my case, I was on June 30 on the long Mirghani Avenue, which is overlooked by the Presidential Palace, and we were packed like sardines, whereas this place is more spacious than Tahrir Square. I was afraid that at that moment there would not be many people in Tahrir Square, but there were actually as many people there as there were under Mubarak.

That does not even take into account the fact that in the south of the country, the mobilization was very important, whereas in 2011 it was almost nonexistent. It was the same story in the provincial towns that had not moved very much at that time and which did this time.

What is happening inside the Muslim Brotherhood?

The Brotherhood is both a sect and a political movement. So those in the Brotherhood who criticized Morsi reasoned as members of a political movement, but others reasoned as adherents of a sect who had to obey the orders of the Guide. This is part of the doctrine of "listening and obedience." They kiss the Guide's hand and therefore it is the sectarian aspect that prevailed over the political aspect.

For me, the Muslim Brotherhood as such is finished. They can only return to centre stage if they recombine as a political movement which has got rid of the sectarian aspect. But since the Brotherhood operates as a sect they are from my point of view finished. There are of course

dissidents among young members of the Muslim Brotherhood, who may constitute themselves as a political organization on the basis of the ideology of the Brotherhood, but stripped of its sectarian dimension.

On the army

Can we speak of a military coup?

The petition and the demonstrations did not manage to get rid of Morsi; it was ultimately the army which actually deposed him. There is a whole debate about whether or not it was a coup. For me, the fact that the army intervened is not enough to say that it was a coup.

When the army deposed Mubarak, I did not hear anyone in France talking about a coup. Whereas the army had directly deposed him and replaced him. If we now say that what took place in July 2013 was a coup, we have to say that it was even more the case in 2011, since there were in June-July 2013 between 17 and 33 million people in the streets to demand the departure of Morsi, twice the number of demonstrators there were in January 2011. So for me, in both cases, it was not a coup.

Are Egyptians now faced with a military government?

The return of the military to power on July 3, 2013, was to some extent the repetition of what happened with the Brotherhood a year earlier. The present government is not only a military government, but a "mixed" government. The military do not in fact have the means of imposing a "complete" government, even though they are trying to do so. Real internal struggles exist at the head of the state and on the political scene, and things are not settled.

Egyptians feel they owe General Sissi a debt of gratitude for having got rid of the Brotherhood and for having protected them, but that should not be interpreted as unconditional support for the army or the new government. I think it is only support for the specific action of having got rid of the Brotherhood. And as soon the army goes beyond this role, and this is already the case, people will take notice. This sudden and massive support may then very well disappear as quickly as it came.

For 60 years, there was no real political life, and 40 per cent of the population is illiterate. There is a lack of political culture and people do not necessarily have the tools needed to analyze the situation. But they learn quickly and react much faster than one might think. So we should not bury the revolution because of the support for a government that is not democratic. It is only a stage that has to be gone through.

Are we moving towards a return to a "military-police order" to liquidate the revolution?

We cannot put it like that, because the military-police regime never actually fell, neither with the government of the Military Council in 2011, nor with that of the Brotherhood in 2012. The irony is that the two main people responsible for the present repression against the Brotherhood were appointed by it: that is the case of General Sissi and of the current Minister of the Interior. The latter was appointed in December 2012 after his predecessor had refused to repress the demonstrators who had come to protest outside the presidential palace against the constitutional decree by which Morsi gave himself the powers of a dictator.

What is the policy of the present government?

We are witnessing the pendulum swinging between repression and an attempt at integration. Kamal Abu Aita, the former president of the independent trade union confederation EFITU, who has become Minister of Labour, is trying to play the role of an intermediary and to remain in government to achieve the objectives he has set himself. But he has also on occasion called in the police against the workers, for example to remove the workers of the textile industry who had staged a sit-in at the Ministry of Labour.

What complicates the situation is that, given that the workers' movement is unstructured, political quarrels sometimes predominate. For this reason it is quite common for unions to accuse each other of acting in a particular way because they represent a particular political movement. This argument is also used by supporters of Kamal Abu Aita against those who oppose government policy.

Will General Sissi run for president?

There are pressures or manipulations for him to do so, with a petition signed by about a million people.

But it is not sure that he will run. The army has actually more to lose than it has to gain by putting itself in the front line: as happened with Morsi, there are already videos circulating showing occasions when Sissi made clumsy remarks. Sissi has for the moment a certain aura, but if he runs for president, he will very quickly come down from the pedestal where he is at present.

However, it is more than probable that the army will play a role in the elections. This is already the case. Samy Annan, the former head of the General Staff and former number two of the Military Council is said to be already a candidate. Hossam Kheirallah, a former senior office in military intelligence, has also announced his candidacy.

There is therefore a strategy that is being put in place. The military are proceeding cautiously and testing to see which way the wind blows.

On the situation of the population and struggles

Where are we in terms of achieving the goals of the revolution?

We do not always see the colour of them.

* On the economic and social level, the present government is somewhat "right-wing social-democrat." The social measures that it has taken are just mini-measures that are not at all what is necessary in the present situation. They have been conceded only to try to calm people's anger and prevent a new revolutionary wave that could sweep away everything.

Let us consider some examples of social measures adopted recently:

- Free tuition;
- Reducing the price of bus tickets;
- A minimum wage of 1200 pounds (135 euros) in the public sector.

This minimum wage is the amount demanded by the confederation of independent trade unions EFITU in January 2011. But since then prices have increased greatly, and the EFITU has refused such a small amount, which is not up to what is needed. And that is all the more so because the

calculation of these 1200 pounds includes both salary and bonuses; for many people, it actually results in no significant increase.

The example of education is for me important and symbolic. The government has announced exemption from payment of tuition fees, but education is officially free already. Parents pay less than 100 pounds (15 euros) per year. Certainly, for very poor people, that is not negligible. But the real problem is that this free education that is proclaimed is in reality very theoretical. Because they are very badly paid, many teachers do not earn enough to live decently. As a result, many teach their lessons badly and/or give bad marks so as to then be able to offer paid tuition, which represents the bulk of their income. In order to establish really free education, it is not enough to dispense the parents from paying 15 euros per year. We should start by paying teachers properly so that tuition is no longer necessary!

* A new constitution is being written and new elections are scheduled. But given the lack of political culture and organization, as well as the divide between young people and the political parties, there is a risk that this leads again to the establishment of a government that does not represent the revolution. From there, it remains to be seen whether a new revolutionary wave will sweep away the future government, or if this government can establish sufficient safety valves to avoid a social explosion.

What is the situation concerning social struggles?

There are certainly a lot of social struggles, but the workers' movement is poorly organized and does not have the capacity to transform the movements into a tool for achieving demands.

Over the past year, there have been approximately 3,000 strikes, protests and sit-ins. But most of them are poorly organized. As the struggles come up against a wall, and there is the pressure of daily life when workers are not paid, many of them end up being discouraged and their movement runs out of steam.

This problem will only be resolved gradually by the organization of the trade-union movement. It will also be necessary for the law to change and finally enable the independent trade unions to organize themselves.

The old official confederation, the ETUF, does not serve the interests of workers and at best pretends to be on their side. As a result, workers who engage in a struggle have difficulty in knowing who is with them and who is against them.

In search of a third way

How can you distinguish yourselves from both the Muslim Brotherhood and the army?

That is what a recently created movement called "The Front of the Path of the Revolution" intends to do. It was formed by activists in the mobilizations of 2011 and 2013.

It is based on quite a broad political spectrum, including in particular the Revolutionary Socialists, liberals and activists of the traditional Left.

What is the influence of the Revolutionary Socialists?

They have very little direct influence. But on the other hand their indirect influence is important: they are present in the demonstrations; they distribute a lot of pamphlets. A number of the ideas

they stand for are taken up in a diffuse way on the political scene, even though people often do not know who is behind these ideas.

What is the situation of Haitham Mohamedain?

This activist lawyer was detained from September 5th to September 7th and then released, but charges are still hanging over him like a sword of Damocles. These charges are ridiculous: terrorism, membership of an illegal organization, a plan to overthrow the government by force, etc...

Sexual harassment of women and the specific oppression of certain social categories

In what context is the sexual harassment of women taking place?

Harassment against women has been rooted in society here for a very long time. It is a real disease of Egyptian society. It is on the rise and is getting worse, especially in the city centres.

In the existing legislation, there is nothing about sexual harassment. Certainly, there are texts concerning indecent assault and others relating to rape. But sexual harassment, which is not directly either one or the other, is not punishable by law!

Alongside "traditional" sexual harassment there has emerged a real sexual terrorism, aimed at forcing women to stay at home and at preventing them from becoming activists.

Do other categories of people experience specific oppression?

In Mubarak's time, there were two categories of people who were not very involved in politics: women and Copts.

- It is no coincidence that during the big demonstrations, highly organized sexual harassment took place: about a hundred men would form a square around a woman and isolate her from her comrades, before tightening the square around her. It was a really military-style tactic.

- Similarly, a demonstration for the rights of the Copts was bloodily suppressed in October 2011 in Maspero (outside the headquarters of the public television). There were about thirty people killed, mostly crushed by tanks.

- A similar kind of repression was used on football fans, such as at the end of January 2012 in the stadium in Port Said, because they had started to get involved politically.

We are facing widespread repression, but it is more particularly aimed at the categories that were previously not involved in politics. The purpose of such actions is that every time a new category begins to get involved, they try to drive it back so that the level of political participation of the people is as low as possible and that politics remains in the hands of the "elites" and of the regime that has not yet fallen.

P.S.

* Translation International Viewpoint. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org>