

# Whither Egypt: Return of the military... and then?

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The massive rejection of the repressive neoliberal policies of the Muslim Brotherhood was reflected in spring 2013 by the biggest popular mobilisation that Egypt had known in its long history. The left forces were unfortunately not in a position to offer a political outcome finally allowing the realisation of the social and democratic demands of the revolution of 2011. That allowed the army to return on July 3 to the power that they had to abandon following the presidential elections of June 2012.

## A broad repressive wave

On August 14 the army launched an offensive of wide scope against the sit-ins organized by the Muslim Brotherhood demanding the restoration to power of former president Morsi. Around 500 people were killed in half a day. In "reprisals" the next day the Islamists were accused of attempting to unleash an inter-communal war with the firing of 36 Coptic churches, followed by a series of aggressions like an attack on a Copt wedding on October 20. This led to four deaths including two girls aged 8 and 12, as well as a dozen wounded. On October 6, 2013 clashes between pro-Morsi and anti-Morsi forces led to 51 deaths and 371 wounded.

On November 4 the trial began of the overthrown president and 14 Muslim Brotherhood leaders for "incitement to murder" of demonstrators. The Brotherhood had predicted a huge response across the country, but it did not materialize. This was due to several factors:

- the unpopularity of the Brotherhood, reflected in street attacks on some of them and the destruction of some of their offices;
- the scale of the police operation put in place on that day, involving around 20,000 men;
- the most significant repressive wave that the Brotherhood had suffered since the 1950s: more than 2,000 members were arrested including the three main leaders.

It is however probable that all this will not be enough to destroy a movement which has managed to exist underground for decades. All the more so inasmuch as a great part of their economic power and their charity activities are organised in a way which makes them hard to dismantle. There is a real risk that the new regime will engage in a repressive spiral which could strike not only the Islamists but all those opposed to the regime. Some human rights activists have raised concerns on this subject. In the name of the fight against terrorism, a draft law is being drawn up which would lay the bases of a new police state, worse than that of Mubarak.

## Al-Sissi future president?

The strong man of the new regime is riding on a wave of popularity acquired through vanquishing the Brotherhood. Former head of intelligence services under Mubarak, General Abdel Fatah al-Sissi nonetheless enjoys support from some of those who played a decisive role in the fall of the dictator in 2011 and the mobilizations of June-July 2013:

- A part at least of the leadership of the Tamarod (Rebellion) movement, which impelled the mobilizations against Morsi;
- Kamal Abu Aïta, former president of the first independent trade union and then the EFITU federation, who has become minister of labour;
- Hamdeen Sabahi, the Nasserite candidate who almost equalled the vote of the Brotherhood and military candidates at the presidential elections of June 2012, who has already said he will support Sissi if the latter contests the next presidential elections.

The risk is then real that the army of Mubarak, which has conserved its immense economic empire even under the presidency of Morsi, will recover the essence of political power.

### **What left alternative?**

Contrary to what has happened in the past, a minority on the left has refused to play one camp against the other, courageously declaring itself “neither for the Brotherhood, nor for the army”. On this basis “The Front of the Path of Revolution” has been established by militants active in the mobilizations of 2011 and 2013. It is based on a fairly broad political spectrum including notably the Revolutionary Socialists, liberals and activists of the traditional left. The rise in power of such an orientation will depend on its ability to root itself in the essential components of the Egyptian revolution: youth and employees. It is the juncture between these two social movements which made possible the fall of Mubarak. It is on them that the continuation of the revolutionary process rests.

### **The action of the working class**

Certainly many strikes have taken place. But most of them ended in defeat with the risk of tiredness and discouragement that this entails. One of the reasons for this is the great difficulty in developing independent trades unionism. For more than 50 years, the so called “trade union federation”, the ETUF, has primarily been an extension of the state regime into the world of labour. It was only in 2008 that the first independent trade union emerged in the wake of a massive, self organised and extended strike. Two independent federations were founded in the midst of the revolution of 2011. But they remain extremely fragile: the previous legislation not having changed, employers usually have a free hand to dismiss activists seeking to create an independent trade union.

Even if the first independent federation, the EFITU, has around 2 million members, it has derisory resources: most of its members not paying dues because dues are generally automatically deducted by the employer and paid to the old federation. And the latter continues to be responsible for the provision of social services such as health insurance! In becoming minister of labour, former EFITU president Kamal Abu Aïta notably fixed the objective of reviving the draft law of March 2011 finally establishing trade union freedom in Egypt. We will see if his friends in the government will accede to this wish. The fact that in the “committee of 50” responsible for modifying the Constitution, the two places reserved for trades unionists have been offered to fierce opponents of independent trades unionism, hardly gives grounds for optimism in this area. The two places have in fact gone to a representative of the ETUF and somebody from a phony federation set up by an employer concerned with recruiting staff for work in the Gulf countries.

### **Dominique Lerouge**

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