

2011-2014: Egypt's Revolution at Three

Wednesday 2 April 2014, by [RADWAN Noha](#) (Date first published: 1 March 2014).

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ON JANUARY 14 and 15, Egypt held a referendum on a new constitution, drafted following the ouster of president Morsi on July 3rd of last year. The constitution will replace the one promulgated previously, in 2012.

It was a foregone conclusion that, since the referendum was presented as a vote of confidence in the leadership of General Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, the country's minister of defense and vice prime minister for internal security affairs, it was guaranteed to produce a wide majority of "Yes" votes. The official 98% approval, however, must be considered with an eye to the 38% turnout.

Constitutions are at times important and crucial to the success of future governments, but this will not be the case in Egypt. In the absence of strong popular organizations, the constitution is likely to remain no more than ink on paper.

The rise of General Abd al Fattah al-Sisi as the savior of Egypt, since the ousting of president Morsi, can be traced to a complex set of conditions and events, all of which contributed to what amounts to a political counterrevolution and a return to Mubarak's regime.

It may be hard to remain hopeful about a revolution that seems to have been so badly defeated, but I argue for such hope. Having been among those who witnessed the Egyptian revolution from its early 2011 phase [[1](#)], I have been closely observing its ups and downs and unexpected turns, especially during my frequent visits there.

I was there during the last week of June and in early July 2013, and left with the heavy feeling that the revolution of 2011 had run its course. Forced to dissipate down the paths of parliamentary and presidential elections and motley constitutional reforms, it was derailed by a sterile conflict between secularists and Islamists, none of whom seemed interested in any revolutionary changes — and ultimately displaced by a hegemonic discourse of totalitarian ultra-nationalism that has left an entire nation, except supporters of the Muslim Brothers (MB), enchanted with the soft-spoken General al-Sisi.

Al-Sisi, formerly chief of military intelligence, in 2011 defended "virginity tests" (ordered by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to be carried out on arrested women demonstrators — ed.). Now, to paraphrase one of his earliest communiqués, he takes it upon the armed forces to provide the Egyptians with the tender loving care the revolution has failed to provide.

Looking for the Revolution

I returned in December to a country where, for the MB and their supporters, death had become a daily reality following the Rab'a massacre of August 14. Not surprisingly, the massacre itself has become their rallying cry of the ousted President's supporters, despite the fact that merely alluding to it — through any use of the now infamous picture of four fingers raised against a yellow backdrop — had been designated a crime punishable by law, and that more frequently than not the punishment is meted through the barrels of a shotgun.

(Rab'a, where the massacre happened, is the name of the neighborhood mosque. In turn, the mosque takes its name from a 14th century female Sufi mystic. The word *Rab'a* is also Arabic for "fourth," hence the sign.)

What was surprising, however, was the complacency of the larger public with these horrors and more. Yet even a short stay in the country last December made this complacency easier to understand, though not to excuse.

Fear had become the most important state product since July. Fear of the MB's alleged terrorism was on the mind of many, and so they had nothing to say against state terror. Egyptian state media had mastered the art of demonizing the MB. In the eyes of many, they had become nothing more than terrorists and enemies of not only the state, but the Egyptian people themselves.

My December trip to Egypt was primarily motivated by a search. I went searching for signs of hope for the revolution, for the smallest signs that the MB's defiance of state suppression was not all that remained of it. These signs were faint and hard to find, but they were there.

Strikes of the Egyptian workers who have resumed a valiant struggle in very bad times were making considerable victories. In September a small front, Thuwwar [\[2\]](#) was formed, with only 150 founders (28 of whom are women), but several demonstrations that it called for in November and December in downtown Cairo attracted 500-1000 participants.

The front was the result of incessant efforts of a small core of committed individuals and groups such as the Revolutionary Socialists, 6 April, the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights, and several others who remain committed to the goal of a civil government dominated by neither the Brotherhood nor Mubarak's old regime and his military.

The excessively reactionary and repressive measures of the post-July government under the leadership of prime minister Hazem al-Beblawi, a right-wing economist, and General al-Sisi are not serving it well. Failure to indicate any willingness to budge from Mubarak's neoliberal economic policies, and increasing levels of police repression, are leaving the majority of Egyptians with a bitter aftertaste.

It is becoming painfully clear to the masses that their lot will not improve with the present government, or the one that would emerge following the parliamentary and presidential elections anticipated in the next few months. One can certainly say that the objective conditions that precipitated the uprising of 2011 are still in place.

The conditions and grievances that produced Egypt's "revolutionary situation" remains as present today as three years ago, but as Lenin wrote, a revolutionary situation alone is never enough to give rise to a revolution but must be accompanied by the ability of the revolutionary class to take an action strong enough to dislocate the old government. What remains uncertain is when that "revolutionary mass action" will emerge.

The First Phase

Revolutionary change cannot be brought about by the military or under its auspices. Neither can it be delivered by a neoliberal religious-based organization that does not even shun the age-old repressive measures of the state apparatus. Clear as these facts may have been to some, it appears that Egyptians are forced to learn them the hard way.

In January 2011, the deployment of the Egyptian Armed Forces to the streets in the wake of fierce and bloody battles between the police and the protestors, which resulted in the defeat of the police forces and their complete disappearance from the streets, brought about the cheer that would last for the first few months of the revolution: "The people and the army are one hand."

That cheer and sentiment would become even more potent on February 11, when the spokesman of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces announced President Mubarak's resignation and the council's takeover of the country's government. In the following weeks, SCAF would announce that its governance would be a transitional phase during which it would oversee constitutional amendment, parliamentary, and presidential elections.

A nation celebrated and declared the victory of the revolution, and salutations flew in from around the world. Few were skeptical of this alliance of the military and the people, and it was these few who less than a month later returned to Tahrir to resume the sit-ins. SCAF quickly bared its teeth and in the continued absence of the police, subjected the protestors to massive repression.

The protestors' demands focused on more transparency and a clearer commitment to the goals of the revolution, namely social justice, and a real elimination of Mubarak's regime through the prosecution of the deposed president, senior members of his government and of the Egyptian business elite whose accumulation of wealth was augmented through corrupt dealings with Mubarak's state.

Little was done by way of meeting these demands and as is now clear, much of what was done to assuage the protests did not bring the revolution closer to its goals. For example, while Mubarak, his sons and several of their cronies were arrested and charged with corruption as well as assaulting and even killing the protestors of January 2011, the most serious of these charges have been dropped over the course of the trials.

Here one should note that while SCAF's Marshall Mohamed Hussein Tantawi was celebrated in the first half of 2011, for having "stood by the revolution and refused to attack the protestors," his testimony at Mubarak's trial obviously did not include any references to presidential orders of attacking the protestors. The Egyptian media passed over this paradox in silence.

In the summer of 2013, Mubarak and son were released from prison as was business tycoon and former head of the National Democratic Party's policies' committee, Ahmad Ezz, and others. While Mubarak's minister of interior Habib al-Adly received a life sentence for using violence against the demonstrators, time has shown that the Egyptian police has not changed its policies and procedures much. Furthermore, SCAF proved no less murderous than the police as was repeatedly demonstrated in March, July, October and November of 2011.

The Brotherhood and the Military

Ironically enough, the most concrete gain of the continuous protests against SCAF was expediting the plans to transfer the government to an elected president. Ironically, while the Muslim

Brotherhood was nearly absent from these street protests, amid claims of its complicity and secret dealings with SCAF, the organization finally emerged as the biggest winner with the election of president Mohammed Morsi in June 2012.

The broad base of the coalitions that came together to oust Mubarak in January and February of 2011 and the lack of a structured organization among them, two characteristics that helped produce this spectacular uprising, were among the reasons why these revolutionaries failed at the electoral process.

Morsi would spend a year in office, a year in which it would quickly become evident that he was more interested in courting Mubarak's "deep state" than in strengthening the connections between the MB and other forces of resistance to the former regime. Amnesty for General Tantawi, Mubarak's defense minister and former head of SCAF, a promotion of a SCAF member and chief of military intelligence to Minister of Defense, and Morsi's obsequious speech in praise of Egyptian police on the second anniversary of the revolution on January 25, 2013 were only the most glaring signs of this interest.

President Morsi also amply demonstrated complete unwillingness to budge from the established neoliberal economic policies of the previous four decades. His government announced plans to continue borrowing from the International Monetary Fund, privatizing government enterprises and seducing foreign capital investment through tax breaks and investment friendly legislation.

Needless to say, such plans conflict with any aspirations of setting minimum and maximum wages, empowering labor unions, and even adjusting the tax structure. An absence of clear signs of commitment to these aspirations was justified by the need to first "put the country back on its feet," with a focus on stability and regaining the higher levels of GNP that have dropped since 2011.

Morsi's year in office should have been characterized by popular pressure for his government to pursue the revolution's aspirations for a break with Mubarak's regime and its neoliberal policies, and for prosecution of those who have oppressed and pillaged the country for three decades, but instead, the few who voiced such demands were drowned in a media orchestrated campaign to vilify the Brotherhood and their president in the most Islamophobic of terms.

The MB and its supporters were demonized as "Islamists" whose goal is to take over not only the country, but the entire region. A chauvinistic discourse of pride in Egypt's secularism, diversity, multiculturalism and modernity, and the endangerment of all these great characteristics by the Brotherhood's rise to power, dominated the country's "independent" media, primarily television.

Here it should be noted that even a cursory look at the ownership of this media would reveal that independent they are not, and in the service of the people's revolution they will never be. One of the largest and most widely viewed television channels, certainly one that has spearheaded the anti-Morsi campaign is owned by Naguib Sawiris (net worth \$2.7 Billion according to Forbes), owner of the country's largest telecommunications company.

Former military officer Suleiman Amer, who made a fortune building luxury residential resorts amid claims of corrupt means of securing the land at less than market value during Mubarak's era, owns another popular channel with the ironic name of "Tahrir."

Benefiting from the frustration of the majority of the population over the continued economic crisis and indeed a lack of political vision and aptitude within Morsi's government, the Egyptian media derailed the revolution into the inane conflict between secularism and Islamism, aided by a mix of myopia and opportunism on the part of the leaders of the opposition to Morsi's government.

Morsi's opposition crystalized into an alliance between Hamdeen Sabbahi, an avowed Nasserist in favor of state-controlled economy, and prominent liberal Mohammed al-Baradei whose party program advocates liberalization of the market and western style democracy.

The alliance became the nucleus of a front whose members were a hodge-podge mix of prominent figures including some, like Amr Moussa, who had served in Mubarak's regime. Naturally, the "pathetic front," as it was called by Sameh Naguib in the editorial of the Revolutionary Socialists' quarterly *Awraq Ishtirakiyya*, (No, 23, June 2013) could only articulate a single grievance against Morsi's government: They are Islamists, a threat to our secularism.

"The front helped transform the conflict into one over identity, between a civil current represented by the front and an Islamist front represented by the Brotherhood and their allies among the Salafists," wrote Naguib.

If the banality of this secular vs. Islamist discourse was not obvious then, it must have become obvious following President Morsi's ouster when the "secularists" allied themselves with the most conservative group in Egypt, namely the Salafists who had dropped their previous alliance with the Brotherhood like a hot potato, and the most regressive regime in the region, namely the Saudis.

"Then the liberals gave the Brotherhood another free gift through their alliance with the remnants of Mubarak's regime and their constant demand for the intervention of the military," continued Naguib, a demand that the Revolutionary Socialists categorically rejected.

Naguib articulated the conundrum of what transpired at the mass protests of June 30th: All the opponents to the Brotherhood would participate in these protests, but these forces had qualitatively differing goals. Supporters of Mubarak's old regime would be there alongside the liberal bourgeois opposition that only wants to replace the Brotherhood but not continue the revolution.

The revolutionaries would also be there, added Naguib, but for them ending the Brotherhood's rule is not enough of a goal. Rather, the goal was to pursue the revolution of 2011, to prosecute Mubarak's men in the military, the police and the business elite, and to replace the current state with another that directly represents Egypt's workers and peasants and the poor and responds to the people's demands for dignity and social justice.

The "War on Terror" Revives

That the calls for military intervention overwhelmed its opponents through a mass frenzy against the Brotherhood, and that those who emerged as the winners of this intervention were none other than the representatives of the old regime, is now neither a secret nor even news.

The bulk of those who were opposing the MB in the name of the revolution are now eerily silent. The Egyptian ministry of interior is back in its full pre-2011 glory. Mass arrests, street shootings, torture and non-legal detentions are now part of everyday life, all in the name of a George W. Bush like "war on terror."

Egyptians today are making the same mistake that so many Americans made in 2001, giving up civil liberties and critical mindsets in the hope for an ever-elusive security. The pseudo-civil government that has been put in place under the auspices of General al-Sisi has secured the complacency of most of the Egyptian public as it goes through its witch-hunt for the leaders of the Brotherhood, and the massacres of its supporters, through the all too familiar mantra: You are either with us or with the terrorists.

Even activists clearly not allied with the Brotherhood, public heroes only last year, today face repression, albeit less severely than the “Islamists,” with little or no public outrage. Alaa Abd al-Fattah, an activist and blogger who was imprisoned during Morsi’s year in office, has been in police custody since the end of November following an unlawful arrest from his home.

In December, three activists, Ahmad Douma (also imprisoned under Morsi), Ahmad Maher, and Mohammed Adel (leaders of the 6th April movement), received three-year prison sentences on trumped up charges of assaulting police officers. Hundreds more have been arrested, detained, harassed and released, without a legal record of such actions.

On December 18, the police raided the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR), arrested all those present and led them, handcuffed and blindfolded, to a police station where they were harassed for several hours before their release. Reports of such acts of intimidation have become too many to even record.

Struggles of Egyptian Workers

One important revolutionary activity that has been instrumental in Egypt’s revolutionary struggle and remains active today is the workers’ movement. Not surprisingly, reports on this movement have been scarce and corrupted in the Egyptian media and absent from the Western media, which seem to be keen on representing the Egyptian struggle as a revolt against state corruption and repression and a quest for a western-style democracy.

This representation is at odds with even the most basic slogan that has dominated all protest actions: “Bread, freedom and social justice,” with its emphasis on the basic needs of the poor and a more equitable distribution of wealth and resources.

The 2008 workers’ strikes at Mahalla, one of the country’s largest centers of textile industry and a complex with more than 20,000 workers, must be acknowledged as the precursor of what transpired in 2011. The strikers’ demands showed a remarkable development by moving beyond their own specific issues to a demand for a minimum wage of 1200 Egyptian pounds for all workers, in both the public and private sectors.

This demand has continued to be on the agenda of all workers’ movements since then, and only a few months ago the government was compelled to partially respond (as it stands, it is granted for the workers in the public but not the private sector).

The Mahalla workers’ strike was the nucleus for the call for a partially successful general strike on April 6th of the same year, a strike that became the springboard of the organization 6th April, which, with over 70,000 members, has been instrumental in all the protests.

According to the counts of ECESR, workers’ protest actions numbered 447 in 2008, 487 in 2009 and 530 in 2010. Many of these showed the same kind of development in their demands that characterized the 2008 Mahalla strike, calling for the right to form independent unions and to prosecute and change corrupt management, in addition to the typical demands for higher pay. A few of them were carried out by non-manual (white-collar — ed.) labor, another important development in the movement.

One often ignored fact is that Mubarak’s resignation on February 11, 2011 came less than 24 hours after the workers of Mahalla, together with those of the Iron and Steel Industry in Helwan (12,000 workers), and others in Suez, Alexandria and Cairo called for an open-ended general strike. The

change of government in 2011 only temporarily caused the workers' protest movements to slow down, and by March the counts were up again.

According to ECESR, in 2011-2013 the total number of workers' protests was higher than in the ten previous years, in spite of a smear campaign in the mainstream media that accused the protestors of being unpatriotic and focused on their own demands rather than the well-being of the nation.

In fact, the workers' demands continued to go beyond higher wages or better work conditions. They demanded changes of administration, especially in the public sector where there was a deliberate effort under Mubarak's rule to overlook mismanagement and corruption in public enterprises, which would then be sold to private investors at low prices.

A long struggle by workers in a linen textiles factory recently forced a court order that reversed one of those privatization efforts, which had left the factory in the hands of a Saudi investor.

Some Reason for Optimism

One lesson that the post July 3rd government learned — which Morsi's had not grasped — is that the workers' movement must be appeased. (It is my personal impression that president Morsi may have conflated the workers and the poor, thinking that he didn't need to appease the former on account of the MB's base among the latter).

Thus, it was among the new government's first and most surprising decisions to offer a seat in the cabinet to labor activist Kamal Abu Eita, previously chair of the first independent federation of labor unions, formed in 2010, a man who had for years agitated against the regime [3].

Second came the granting of the demanded minimum wage of 1,200 pounds for workers in state-run industries. Yet much to the surprise of the government, the workers' struggles continued and their protests seem to stop in one complex only to begin in another. On August 12, an army tank showed up along with other security forces at the sit-in of the Suez Steel workers to end a strike and arrest its leaders [4].

Several smaller strikes and workers' protests followed, and in November the Iron and Steel workers once again picked up the baton. This time union leaders adopted a new strategy: Rather than striking, the call was for occupying the management headquarters, and the demands were not only related to wages and work conditions but also included a complete overhaul of the complex's management policy.

The Iron and Steel factory, they explained, is one of a kind in the country and as such represents one of the strategic national industries. It was conceived in the 1960s as part of a complex, which also produces the coke coal required for its operations. Under Mubarak's government, however, the coke factory was allowed to export its output, leaving the iron and steel factory able to run only one of its four furnaces. This resulted in reduction of the number of the factory workers from the original 25,000 to the current 12,000.

Although the workers' protests began with the demand for the payment of an annual bonus, which had been withheld in 2013, the demands quickly escalated to the change of management and a government commitment to run the factory at full capacity. After 23 days of the sit-in, and multiple negotiations with the aim of convincing the workers to compromise and accept partial solutions, the government agreed to all the workers' demands.

The struggle of the iron and steel workers exposed Abu Eita, the labor leader turned minister, and showed that the government had unfortunately succeeded in coopting him and securing his allegiance to its policies. But to coopt a leader is not to coopt a movement.

The victory of the iron and steel workers is quite significant. It is not going to bring about a change of the regime or the success of the revolution. Yet it is one of many indications that Egypt's revolutionary situation will continue and that the country's proletariat consciousness has grown.

Another workers' movement important to mention is that of the Noubaseed corporation, founded in 1976 as a state-run company for the production of seeds and fertilizers that grew to produce 60% of Egypt's seeds for agriculture. It was sold in 1988 to a Saudi investor, but in the wake of the January 2011 revolution, investigative reports were presented to the Egyptian judiciary with evidence of illegal transactions, including illegal acquisitions of land by the investor.

The investor, "Abdallah al-Ka'ky," in turn decided to close down the company, withdraw its bank accounts, and present the case to an international court. Mubarak's legislation had given foreign investments such powers against both the workers and the state. In response, company workers took over the entire production process, operating quite successfully with the help of experts from the ministry of agriculture and the local population of the Noubariyyah district where the company is located.

These days, two years later, the current government is moving towards a reconciliation with the Saudi investor and an agreement to drop charges and return the company to him. The workers are protesting to restore Noubaseed to its original status as government owned. The Noubaseed story is another proof of a rising workers' consciousness.

Last but not least of Egypt's workers' protests is an ongoing one among medical professionals, led by an organization called "Physicians without Borders," calling for higher pay and better work conditions for government-hired medical professionals. This consciousness, and an ongoing closing of the ranks between professionals and the traditional working class, represents today the flicker of hope for the revolution in a very bleak landscape.

There is no doubt that after the dust settles and the nation's fascination with the soft-spoken general subsides, it will become clear that Egypt's revolutionary situation has not changed, that the consciousness of its revolutionary class has grown, and that the ruling class will not be able to maintain the old ways. But once again, as Lenin reminds us:

"It is not every revolutionary situation that gives rise to a revolution; revolution arises only out of a situation in which the above-mentioned objective changes are accompanied by a subjective change, namely, the ability of the revolutionary class to take revolutionary mass action strong enough to break (or dislocate) the old government, which never, not even in a period of crisis, 'falls,' if it is not toppled over."

Obviously, the majority of Egyptians have been trying to topple the old regime for three years now. It remains to be seen whether they will succeed in the foreseeable future.

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P.S.

* From Against the Current n°169, March/April 2014: <http://www.solidarity-us.org/>

Footnotes

[1] Available on ESSF (article 31533), [How Egyptian Women Took Back the Street Between Two “Black Wednesdays”: A First Person Account](#).

[2] <https://www.facebook.com/thuwar.eg>

[3] <http://egyptelections.carnegieendowment.org/2013/10/10/kamal-abu-eita>

[4] <http://menasolidaritynetwork.com/2013/08/12/egypt-appeal-for-solidarity-after-steel-workers-arrested-by-army/>