

Egypt, situation and prospects - Part 1: From the end of the revolutionary wave to preparing for a new revolution

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Part one of a two-part article by Sameh Naguib.

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There can be no doubt that we are witnessing a clear victory for the counter-revolution and confirmation of the end of the first wave of the Egyptian revolution. This does not mean, however, that the counter-revolution's victory is final, nor does it mean that the revolutionary process has run its course. But it does mean that we are facing a new kind of challenge which requires serious study in order for revolutionaries to be able to confront and eventually overcome it.

The coronation of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as president of Egypt has taken place over the corpses of the revolution's martyrs and with the largest wave of detentions in Egypt's modern history. He has received unprecedented support from big business, from all the security, judicial and religious institutions of the state and from massive privately-owned and state media institutions which are under the direct control of the secret police. He has brought in repressive laws which have not only hugely restricted the space for political action, but have even clamped down social and economic demands under the cover of the "war on terrorism" and the need to save the state from the effect of the cracks which the revolution of 2011 opened within it.

Perhaps the most important lesson of this counter-revolution is that to underestimate the strength and power of your enemies is a fatal mistake. Whatever we might call el-Sisi - pimp, traitor, murderer - he is a formidable opponent. If we want to defeat the counter-revolution and begin to prepare for the next revolutionary wave, we must reject the logic which claims "you can't", because el-Sisi is capable of sending us back to point zero with a successful counter-revolution with popular backing among the middle class and large sections of the poor.

There is no point in reducing the scale of the defeat or the size and nature of the enemy, unless we are simply trying to salve our own consciences. But if our goal is victory in the coming waves of the revolution, then we must study the balance of power between us and our enemies in a cold-blooded, scientific fashion. Our enemy, who has sentenced the revolution to death, did precisely this. We must do the same on our long path towards the victory of our second revolution and retribution for our martyrs.

But there is a long road from the present situation to the elimination of el-Sisi and his men and women. It is a road which demands sound strategic vision and the capacity to set appropriate

tactics. The process of building revolutionary organisation is characterized by patience, perseverance and working for the long haul.

The contradictions of el-Sisi's rule

Despite the victory of counter-revolution, the military dictatorship still faces crises and severe challenges which we must study. Here we will sketch in outline strategy and tactics for the coming period.

The economic crisis

There is a clear contradiction between the ideological and populist content of the new regime and the lack of any real possibility of genuine economic growth which will allow stability. The permanent "war on terrorism" and the permanent exclusion of the Brotherhood (which are necessary to maintain the unity of the alliance of the state institutions and the support of a large section of the middle class) will prevent any rapid return to foreign investment and tourism. The economy will remain in perpetual crisis, surviving from month to month, thanks to aid from the Gulf. This aid cannot continue over the medium term without a minimum level of stability, allowing the transformation of Gulf funding into profitable investments.

The second contradiction which the economy of the counter-revolution is suffering from is the huge gap between the enormous expectations among wide sections of the middle class in particular, whipped up by the private and state media machine, that they will see a tangible change for the better in their living conditions.

These expectations will quickly run up against the regime's right-wing, austerity policies. And any serious attempt by el-Sisi to adopt populist policies, even on a temporary basis, will run into that other impregnable wall: the interests of big business and the Gulf investors. The principles of neo-liberalism are a red line, and a condition for the latter's support for military rule.

When el-Sisi talks of imaginary leaps and jumps that the Egyptian economy needs to make, he is right. For Egyptian capitalism to return to competitiveness this requires the fundamental transformation of the economic infrastructure (fixed capital). This means building nuclear power stations to solve the energy crisis, new road and rail networks, and educational institutions to develop new skills. Over the past half century, Egyptian capitalism and its state have invested in raising productivity through numerous failed projects.

The problem with these kind of projects is that they need two factors which el-Sisi does not have: massive funding and time. The funding of such huge projects cannot be achieved using private capital either from the Gulf or locally, because these infrastructure projects will only achieve profitability after many years, or even after decades. Repairing the railway network, for example, will cost tens of billions of dollars and take at least ten years. Building nuclear power plants would cost at least double that amount and they will not start producing energy until at least fifteen years after beginning construction.

No austerity programme can deliver the necessary funding, even if the mad General slashed wages and doubled working hours. So how will the economy look between now and the distant future? El-Sisi's regime will remain wracked by crises: an indebted, corrupt, obedient beggar, dependent on Saudi Arabia, the UAE and the USA. Meanwhile the mentality of the military bureaucracy in dealing with economic planning will lead to catastrophes and giant projects on paper which are empty of any substance (by playing with the geography of the provinces for example).

This does not mean that the regime is about to collapse, as the Brotherhood are endlessly repeating, nor does it mean that a second revolution is at the gates. Economic crises do not in themselves lead to collapse or revolution. For the essence of el-Sisi's popularity lies in a mixture of expectations and fear. Fear of the collapse of the state, fear of chaos, civil war, terrorism and the collapse of security. Fear that the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria is the future. There is a strong desire for stability at any price among large sections of the middle class, and significant sections of the working class and poor.

The balance between the security institutions of the state

Mubarak's state relied on a division of labor and a precise balance between different state institutions and centres of power. The army in its various sections was balanced against the presidency and the Interior Ministry; the General Intelligence and Military Intelligence services were balanced against State Security, while big business was balanced against the leaders of the National Democratic Party. There are of course overlaps and cooperation between all these actors, but there is also fierce competition for influence, wealth and power. This interaction and balance has developed over the decades since the Nasserist era through many conflicts and crises.

However, the January Revolution created unprecedented fissures in this edifice, even shaking the pillars on which it balanced. The collapse of the police and State Security, and even embryonic rebellions in the ranks of the army, the collapse of the venerable institution of the presidency, which always used competition between the different institutions of the state to retain its powers.

Perhaps the principal role which el-Sisi has played, and which has propelled him into presidential office, has been to save this system from fracture and collapse. There is no doubt that he was the mastermind on the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces of the battle to preserve the coherence of the state. He played a pivotal role as the director of Military Intelligence in preserving the unity of the army and preventing the revolution from leaking into its ranks (we will not know all the details of this until after he has been overthrown). He played a major role in the rebuilding of the Interior Ministry and State Security, and in preventing the clashes between the police and army from getting out of control. In the beginning, the Brotherhood helped him, but he completed this mission over their corpses.

Yet the Egyptian state remains severely fractured across all its institutions. El-Sisi's moment as the leader who is the savior and unifier will not last long. For there are networks of interest and centres of power and the balance between them is very difficult to restore.

Perhaps the fatal weakness in El-Sisi's regime (god willing) is his lack of genuine political party. It is no longer possible to rely on the machine of the old National Democratic Party which wants to return to its previous ascendancy in its full powers (note the paralysis or abstention of this machine during the presidential elections). El-Sisi's popularity, of course, lies largely among his backers in the middle class, but this is not organized in the form of a party with a clear ideology and structure. Nationalist hysteria and panic among the middle classes are not, on their own, enough to convert these masses into an influential political party.

The current harmony and unity within El-Sisi's camp essentially rests on a negative, temporary basis: the eradication of all traces of the revolution, and even the complete elimination of the only mass reformist party in the country, the Muslim Brotherhood. The more that the impossibility of these tasks is revealed, the greater contradictions and splits appear among the dictator's allies.

What we have seen in terms of splits among Tamarod and the Popular Current and their transformation from complete subservience to el-Sisi to a limited degree of criticism and opposition

presages splits on a deeper and more important scale.

The crisis of the opposition and the revolutionary forces

Reformists always betray revolutions. This betrayal either leads to the removal of the reformists and the consummation of revolution or to counter-revolution, in the absence of effective revolutionary forces with deep roots in the masses, capable of leading the battle against the counter revolution and the reformists together. History is full of examples of this. In the Chinese Revolution of 1925-27 the Stalinists betrayed the revolution and the result was that they were wiped out along with the revolution under the rule of General Chang Kai Shek. During the German Revolution of 1918-1919, the Social Democrats betrayed the revolution and the result was the rise of Hitler and Nazism.

Perhaps one of the few positive examples until now is that of the Russian Revolution. The revolution of February 1917 brought the reformists to power under Kerensky's leadership who quickly betrayed the principles and goals of the revolution but the Bolsheviks were capable of firstly crushing the counter revolution led by Kornilov and then removing Kerensky and completing the revolution.

It has been the lot of the Egyptian Revolution to suffer a double betrayal. The first time it was betrayed by the Muslim Brotherhood who arrived in power on the back of the revolution and then delivered it to its enemies and, with exceptional stupidity, paved the way for the counter revolution which overthrew both them and the revolution itself.

But the final preparation for the counter revolution came at the hands of the liberals, the left and the nationalists who created the National Salvation Front with Mubarak's supporters and the secret police, and afterwards the Tamarod movement and the coordination for 30 June. These forces played a fundamental role in the transformation of what began as a new revolutionary wave against the Muslim Brotherhood's betrayal of the demands and principles of the revolution, their complacency over the Interior Ministry and the Army, against their policies discriminating against women and Coptic Christians, their failure to address workers demands. Under the leadership of these forces, this revolutionary momentum transformed into the rise of popular support for the counter revolution.

How did this all come about?

The beginning of a new revolutionary wave connecting hostility to the Brotherhood because of their betrayal of the revolution, and hostility to Mubarak's state with its Army, Interior Ministry and Mubarak's supporters, was rapidly transformed by the secular reformists through breaking the link between these two elements (opposition to the Brotherhood and opposition to Mubarak's state), as they concentrated the whole of the battle on the single goal of removing the Brotherhood.

Here, the bourgeois media and naturally behind the scenes, the security services, played a pivotal role in focussing the entire attack on the Brotherhood alone. The "secular" reformist leaders justified this in a classically opportunist manner. According the logic of their position, the Brotherhood was an obstacle to the completion of the revolution and it was necessary to get rid of them first, and only afterwards deal with the remnants of Mubarak's regime. Therefore they saw raising slogans and demands against the army, the police and Mubarak's supporters during the battle against the Brotherhood as weakening the movement to overthrow them. The natural conclusion to this opportunist logic (which was Stalinist in its stagism), was to argue for the necessity of an alliance between all elements opposed to the Brotherhood, regardless of the position they took towards the revolution and its demands. Not only an alliance with Mubarak's supporters,

which began early on with the creation of the Salvation Front, but more importantly and dangerously, an alliance with steel heart of Mubarak's state: the army, police and security services.

Thus the slogan calling for the overthrow of the Brotherhood in order to correct the path of the revolution, became a cover for a project the essence of which was to claim that it was the revolution itself which brought the Brotherhood to power, and threatened "the state" with collapse and civil war. Thus the fall of the Brotherhood and rebuilding of "the state" was the only safe way out of the crisis, without Mubarak and his family but with the return of the military and their institutions to power. This was the goal which the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces had failed to achieve during the first wave of the revolution.

30 June

Thus 30 June did not come as the crest of a revolutionary wave travelling in the same direction as the wave of January 2011 but in reality to pave the way and to provide a popular mandate for counter revolution with a military coup with its massacres and arrests.

Of course this was not our perspective or analysis in the Revolutionary Socialists at the time. The situation was very complicated. We took part in 30 June with other revolutionary forces, on the basis that in a mass mobilisation of this magnitude and in the context of the wave of protests and strikes which preceded it, it would be possible to cleanse its ranks of traitors and supporters of the police and army. Or at least to create a degree of independence for a section of the masses which wanted to get rid of the Muslim Brotherhood as part of the process of completing the revolution against Mubarak's state.

But what happened on the day itself was enough to confirm that the balance of forces was not at all in our favor. For despite having the appearance of a million-strong demonstration and despite the chants of "the people want the downfall of the regime" the social and political content of this mobilisation and these slogans had been transformed into the opposite of the previous waves of the revolution. For the most influential mass element in the protests and the one which dominated was the secular middle class - Muslim and Christian, men and women - who were dominated by a state of hysterical hostility towards the Brotherhood, mixed with hysterical adulation and celebration of the army, and even the police: the same police which the first revolution had ripped to shreds, and the same army which millions chanted against and against its Supreme Council during 2011-2.

Another thing which caused confusion about the nature of 30th June was a wrong and simplistic understanding of what we call "the masses" or "the people". It is not only that the people and the masses are divided into different social classes but even different sections within each of these classes adopt and express varying degrees of consciousness and are thus motivated and driven by the slogans and demands they adopt.

The second source of the state of confusion which affected 30 June was because the counter revolution used many of the methods and slogans and even the forms of mobilisation which the revolution had used before. In fact, many counter revolutions in history have imagined themselves to be a new revolution or a corrective revolution.

The position of the Muslim Brotherhood

However, besides all of these complications there was another source for the confusion among the revolutionaries (and of course we were among them) towards what was happening. And this was a range of perspectives on the nature of the Muslim Brotherhood. Since the 1990s, the Revolutionary

Socialists have adopted an analysis of Islamist movements, and at the head of them the Brotherhood, which strongly contradicted the position taken by most of the Egyptian Left from Al-Tagammu Party to the Egyptian Communist Party with smaller groups which are no longer in existence such as the People's Socialist Party and the Communist Workers Party.

All of these groups were afflicted with Stalinist diseases of various sorts, seeing the Muslim Brotherhood as a kind of religious fascism, and a collaborator of one kind or another with US imperialism, opposed to what they called the Egyptian national movement. For with the broadening influence of Islamist movements in general, and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular, the positions of the left oscillated between open support for Mubarak's regime as it confronted "religious fascism" to the need to defend the "secular state", or saying that the fascism of the Brotherhood was much worse than Mubarak's tyranny.

This was the position of Rifaat al-Said and the Tagammu Party and its supporters in the Egyptian Communist Party. Some sections of the left of Tagammu adopted a position which was superficially different but was essentially the same. This position argued that the confrontation between Mubarak's state and the Islamist movement was between two factions of the bourgeoisie engaged in a struggle for power. According to this perspective, we should oppose both sides together and work to build a mass left platform or party which represented a third alternative to the oppression of the Brotherhood and the tyranny of Mubarak. But this position was not in practice any different from the position of Rifaat al-Said, because the left has not had any mass support since the 1980s and the political struggle was between the Mubarak regime on the one hand and the Islamist movement on the other. Neutrality in these circumstances was tantamount to implicitly supporting the stronger side, even if this was not explicit. Even worse than this, considering that the Islamist movement was a fascist or semi-fascist movement always meant that Rifaat Said's position was the most consistent.

For from the point of view of the Marxist Left, and the working class, on whose behalf all of these factions claimed to speak, nothing is more dangerous than fascism's arrival in power. This analytical contradiction was what led in the end to the unity between these sections of the left and Rifaat al-Said and collapsing into the arms of El-Sisi after the Brotherhood came to power.

If the position of the Stalinists in their different varieties, from Rifaat al-Said to Kamal Khalil, led to the conclusion "always against the Islamists, sometimes with the state", the analysis by the Revolutionary Socialists of the Islamist movements led to the opposite conclusion: "always against the state, sometimes with the Islamists".

From our point of view, the Islamist movement is full of contradictions, has many factions, and has witnessed many changes and transformations throughout its history. Freezing it in one moment of its history or treating it as monolith is totally incompatible with a scientific approach to analysing and understanding such movements. For us it is impossible to understand the Muslim Brotherhood except in the historical context of its development and the changing social composition of its leadership, its cadres, and its broad mass of supporters. And following from that, their position in the political and class struggle in Egypt.

This is not the place to present a detailed Marxist analysis of the Brotherhood (which is present in the classic writings of the Revolutionary Socialists and freely available on our website). What we must emphasize here is our description of the Muslim Brotherhood as a reformist movement, carrying within it class contradictions and with a socially conservative outlook. The position that is not a fascist movement and has no link with fascism, has been proved completely correct as the Brotherhood have moved from opposition to power and then to prison.

During the last decade of Mubarak's rule, the Brotherhood remained the largest mass opposition

organisation. Their opposition was confined, however, to conservative reformism, permanently oscillating between appeasement and limited confrontation. However, the absence of organized political alternatives, and the tiny size of the leftist, liberal and nationalist competition, meant that the Brotherhood remained the only convincing opposition to the corruption and tyranny of the regime, from the point of view of large sections of the lower middle class and the poor, including the working class.

The performance of the Brotherhood during the first phase of the revolution is the best proof of their contradictory nature. Their youth and rank-and-file strongly participated in the revolution while their leaders were negotiating with figureheads from the regime in order to reach a compromise. After the fall of Mubarak and the seizure of power by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, the leaders of the Brotherhood made their historic deal with the military. The Brotherhood worked to absorb and eliminate the revolution in exchange for participation in power. This classic deal has been repeated many times in the history of revolutions. Kerensky and the Mensheviks did a similar deal with the remnants of the Tsar's regime in Russia, as did the Social Democrats with the leaders of the German Army in the German Revolution, and even the Marxist Salvador Allende with Pinochet, the Chilean Army chief between 1970 and 1973.

With Mohamed Morsi's assumption of the presidency, both his fate and the fate of the Brotherhood were sealed. The Brotherhood were neither able to absorb and calm the streets and the eruption of social demands and hopes which the revolution had triggered, nor were they able to seize control over the key sections of the state from the Army, the police, the judges and the media. Nor did they control the key sections of the Egyptian economy with its huge monopolies which remained in the hands of the same billionaires and generals as under Mubarak.

The army, with the support of the secular reformist forces, used 30 June, as the cover for a military coup and for the transformation of the anger against the Brotherhood into a bloody mandate not only to eliminate the Brotherhood, but to wipe out the 25 January Revolution. What began with massacres and arrests among the ranks of the Brotherhood, quickly became an all out war against whoever took part in this revolution and against all its principles and demands. It is this war which is being celebrated now, a year after its beginning.

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