

Cairo Conference ? a missed opportunity

Simon Hardy Thu, 09/06/2011 - 20:01

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Simon Hardy reports on the recent Cairo conference in solidarity with the Arab revolutions

In any conference ? but particularly an international conference ? we can judge the measure of its success by a few simple criteria. Firstly, it must draw in significant forces that can participate in the discussion. Secondly, the discussion must clarify its objectives. Finally, it must speak loudly to the world what it has agreed and what the next actions of its participants will be.

On all three accounts, the Cairo conference in solidarity with the Arab revolutions held in early June was, sadly, a failure. Indeed, I take no pleasure in writing that. The League for the Fifth International is a consistent champion of such international conferences and gatherings to organise the most internationalist and clear-sighted activists within a movement. We actively participated in the European and World Social Forum movement, despite the constant attempts of its leadership to limit it to a talking shop and defeat its potential for coordinating worldwide action whether against imperialist wars or global capitalist crisis.

Before the Cairo conference we pointed out that it had the opportunity to go beyond the original Cairo anti war conferences (2002-2008) and relate to the revolutionary social movements struggle against dictatorship, poverty and neoliberalism that ?if seized with both hands, (it) could make an historic impact.?

Sadly the attendance at the conference was very small ? around 150 on the first day which slumped to 70 on the next two. Two recent splits from the British SWP were in attendance, Counterfire and the International Socialist Group. Delegates from the PSTU in Brazil came, as did several from the International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network. The turn out from across the Middle East, however, was the real failure. Only one or two people from a few countries, and a handful of Egyptians. No one from Bahrain or Tunisia attended and only one person spoke as Palestinian.

There was a small intervention by SWP/ IST members from Britain. John Rose intervened in an early session and argued that the small size of the conference was due to the absence of the Muslim Brotherhood who had played an important role in previous conferences. Reaching out to them was a central task, he argued, and the organisers of the conference had refused them an invitation, which subsequently meant that the Kemalist activists did not want to attend, either.

This argument was frankly bizarre. The Egyptian organisers, alongside John Rees from Counterfire, pointed out, correctly, that the Muslim Brotherhood had put itself on the wrong side of the barricades when

it supported a yes vote in the constitutional reform which reinforced the position of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, the de facto unelected government in Egypt today.

Inviting a representative from them to the conference would be like inviting someone from the army to come and speak. Whilst it is true that the Muslim brotherhood is divided between a rich, bourgeois conservative leadership and a more radical youth wing it is not the case that the youth were forbidden to attend. It is also not clear why the youth would have been more likely to attend if a representative from their organisation was speaking when they are already in open disagreement with them.

Regardless of the issue concerning the Muslim Brotherhood their involvement or not in the conference was not the central issue in terms of its broadness and inclusiveness. There have been many new left parties and organisations established in recent months, including important new trade unions across the country which either only sent a speaker or did not attend at all. The powerful youth movements like April 6 did not mobilise for the conference either ? and they surely would have brought hundreds of young revolutionaries with them. The IST certainly did not help to make the meeting a success ? their Egyptian section boycotted it altogether.

Despite these problems League members argued that the conference should adopt a statement, even one limited to the issues most in need of immediate action, so that something of worth was produced that could be used as a basis to build a future, larger conference. The European Social and World Social Forums Assemblies in Florence in 2002 and Porto Alegre in 2003 ESF called the 15 February day of action against the war in Iraq which saw 20 million protest across the world. Sadly the organisers of the Cairo conference were not interested in any call for solidarity action with the ongoing revolutions, ? this resulted in a poorly attended ?mute? conference, in which people who attended were privileged to enjoy ?networking and discussions? with each other but with no concrete outcome.

No doubt the organisers were worried that a statement could produce splits in the conference, most notably over Libya where the representative of the Libyan resistance movement was an openly pro-NATO apologist. Such opportunist compromises left the conference with no clear strategy or position on central issues like imperialism?s role in the region ? even though the vast majority of delegates were clearly principled anti-imperialists.

What could the conference have agreed?

The conference could have agreed solidarity with the coming Third Intifada, opposition to imperialist influence in the region and support for every popular movement fighting for democracy. It could have condemned the actions of the Saudi government and the slaughter in Bahrain of pro democracy activists. It could have condemned Assad in Syria as well as Gaddafi in Libya. Moreover it could have called for international working class and popular solidarity from across the world, for people to organise Tahrir squares in every town and city, for resistance to dictatorships and austerity, against war and poverty.

Such a statement, with a commitment to meet again would have helped overcome the lack of numbers with a clear and principled position of international solidarity and a resounding call for action. Something like the Cairo conference is essential for us to meet and discuss strategy ? but this conference was a missed opportunity on all accounts.

Update

After this article was written we received a statement produced by the organisers of the Cairo conference which is copied in below. Clearly the organisers felt the need to produce something out of the conference

but it is very strange that such a document was at no point put to the conference, discussed or debated! It is a welcome site that the conference condemns imperialist intervention in Libya - but that was certainly not the view of all the delegates present. Future conferences must be organised democratically to ensure real participation and inclusion from the forces involved. Too often in the ESF and WSF 'processes' we were presented with declarations which could not be amended or properly debated, drafted by a clique behind the scenes of the mass movement. The Cairo conference offers a great opportunity to co-ordinate anti imperialist and anti capitalist struggles across the world - it must not be squandered with the usual bureaucracy and unaccountability.

Statement of the Cairo Conference 2011

In a unique historic era witnessing the victory of popular revolutions and their eruption in several countries in the Arab region, and in recognition of the huge regional and international impact of these first revolutions of the 21st century, Cairo hosted the Forum of Solidarity with Arab Revolutions in revolutionary Egypt. Numerous leftist and anti-capitalist forces and persons from all over the world, north and south, took part in the Forum.

The Forum's sessions witnessed rich and deep interventions and discussions on the experiences of current Arab revolutions and the challenges they face, as well as the prospects of deepening and extending these revolutionary processes. Discussions dealt with the relationship of these revolutions to the issue of democracy, and the latter's organic connection to the desired social change based on the majority of people's self-management of their lives and taking their destiny into their hands.

Discussions did not cover the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions alone, but dealt also with the main issues raised by popular revolts in Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya and other Arab countries.

Participants agreed on the importance of the left's firm and clear involvement in these revolutions, and its commitment to build large organizational forms to unite its ranks, and the creation of popular alliances as a basis to radicalize and deepen these continuous revolutions and pushing revolutionary transformations forward in the interest of popular classes.

The Forum expressed its absolute and resolute support for Arab popular revolutions against all Arab regimes of tyranny and corruption, with no exception. It called for building the largest possible regional and international networks of solidarity in support of Arab revolutions.

The Forum also expressed its conviction of the connection between democratic struggle from below and social struggle, and the link between anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism. Regarding the specificity of the Libyan revolution, the Forum asserted its firm support for the Libyan people's revolution against the criminal Gaddafi regime. It also condemned the military imperialist intervention in Libya, justified by the barbaric confrontation of the Gaddafi regime of popular peaceful protests, calling for stopping this intervention immediately.

Finally, the Forum expressed its complete solidarity with the struggle of the Palestinian people to gain its complete legitimate rights against the Zionist state, which is the spearhead of the imperialist project in the Arab region and part and parcel of the counter-revolution in it.

Long Live the Arab Revolutions!