

Egypt: counter-revolution in heartland of the Arab Spring poses new challenges

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The victory of the Islamists in the parliamentary elections is a dangerous sign, warns Simon Hardy

FOR?ALL that is new and distinctive about the Arab uprisings, they still have all of the ?classical? features of revolution. One of the cruellest is that revolutions cannot proceed without a backlash of the old elites; to sustain their power and privilege a counter-revolution will always ensue.

Egypt is a textbook example of these contradictions. After the euphoria when Mubarak resigned, the real struggle for power began. The ruling classes and the military manoeuvred to secure their position through an electoral process under their control.

Despite the role that left wing forces played in organising the revolution, it was the Muslim Brotherhood who benefited. Only they had an established institutional base, with a significant degree of support amongst the poorest layers. They were the only organised mass opposition under Mubarak, and after his removal they did a deal with the military to help shape the post-revolutionary phase.

This deal became the manifesto of the counter-revolution. It emerged from within the revolution, but its task was to stabilise the situation, to keep any change within the parameters of capitalism. Egypt would continue to meet its obligations to the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and other creditors under the conditions of global austerity.

Half a revolution

The mobilisations of 2011 saw millions of Egyptians protest and take strike action, but they did not succeed in splitting the army. And the Muslim Brotherhood has since agreed to a series of concessions that effectively grant the generals the power to interfere with the electoral process in the future, in the name of ?upholding the constitution?.

But the revolution on the streets is still ongoing. The recent uprising of football supporters against the police shows that the energy of the movement has not yet dissipated. The danger is that the masses will be demobilised, placated temporarily with elections, and that the street protests and strikes will be isolated and lack mass support.

The left is fragmented across a myriad of different parties. Many boycotted the elections, in protest at the violence carried out by the military during the campaign, which made a mockery of the claim that the elections were ?free and fair?. Attacks on women and Coptic Christians increased, stoking up the fires of sectarian division typical of the divide and rule politics on which military juntas and reactionary elites rest. Those who did participate did quite poorly, winning only a handful of seats.

More worrying still is the rise of the ultra-reactionary Salafists, whose extreme conservatism contrasts with that of the Muslim Brotherhood. They had none of the Brotherhood's pre-established infrastructure, but were flush with money ? suspected to come from Saudi Arabia ? and won 25 per cent of the vote.

The critical question now is the relationship between the streets and workplaces on the one hand, and the military institutions and Islamist-dominated political system on the other. The latter will seek to cohere Egypt around a socially conservative political agenda, while carrying through massive austerity measures. This will inevitably strain the relationship between the huge numbers of poor people who voted and the political elite that promised social justice.

That huge numbers of Egyptians abstained in the election is therefore not likely to be down to ?apathy?, but because they could see that the electoral process was flawed.

These are still reasons to be optimistic for the future of the revolution. The political system that is being created today will be inherently unstable. The breathing space the left and workers' movement won last February ? freedom to protest, to strike, and to organise ? will have to be defended vigorously.

The forthcoming 100-person constituent assembly that will be created by the parliament will rest not on the revolutionary masses in struggle, but on the old state apparatus. The army has decided to refrain from nominating its share of 90 politicians to the lower house until after the presidential elections in June. They will probably allow the new president ? almost inevitably from the Muslim Brotherhood ? to do this for them, between to cement the new alliance between the army and the Brothers against the people.

The revolutionary that began on 25 January has not yet ended. The new masters of Egypt still have to contend with the fact that one dictator was toppled, and that their governments also can be. Next time the Egyptian people must clean out the entire system, rooting out the capitalists, the generals and the reactionaries, in order to secure their real liberation.

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