

Egypt faces an alternative: "democratic" counterrevolution or socialist revolution

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At the end of July and beginning of August it appears the forces which made the Egyptian Revolution in January and February had suffered a serious setback, writes Dave Stockton

Friday 29 July ? the Muslim Brotherhood plus more radical ?Salafist? Islamist groups broke agreements they made with the liberals and the left to hold a common demonstration in favour of releasing political prisoners. The Islamists overwhelming numbers took over Tahrir Square and secular forces felt obliged to withdraw. The Salafists called for Sharia law, denounced secularism and raised chants in favour of the army high command currently ruling the country.

On 1 August police, the army brutally cleared hundreds of demonstrators who had been occupying Tahrir Square since 8 July. However, in the preceding week a group of 26 political parties and movements had already announced that they would stop their Tahrir Square sit-ins during the month of Ramadan, which commenced on 1 August. The army?s actions were designed to impose its authority and power over the left wing of the movement.

The triumph of the Islamists and the army and the apparent eclipse of the left may not be a decisive defeat. But it should be a warning ? especially to those on the left - in Europe and in Egypt - who have illusions that a ?democratic revolution? at least can be made with the Islamist as allies.

Most of the demonstrators on 1 August were families and comrades of the 850 ?martyrs? killed during the revolutionary days in February, demanding the trial of all those responsible for the murders in the police as well as the top figures of the Mubarak regime like the former interior minister, Habib al-Adly.

As the square was cleared over 100 people were arrested and taken to military camps. They will join the thousands still awaiting trial before military tribunals. Mona Seif of the 'No to Military Trials Campaign,' says there are probably thousands who have faced or are facing these drumhead courts, many being held in army prisons. Whilst the worlds media is focussed on the ailing Mubarak lying in his cage in the court, the fate of these protesters who brought him down is left largely unreported.

Yet only a month ago there was the biggest renewal of the mass popular mobilisations Egypt has witnessed since the revolution. Millions came back onto the streets on Friday 8 July to demand justice for the families of the martyrs and an end to the delays in bring their murderers to justice. A wave of strikes too developed in July as more workers pushed forward their demands which had been long suppressed by the military regime.

August, the hottest month of the year and this year being the month-long fast of Ramadan, makes continued mass occupation difficult. Nevertheless the driving of demonstrators out of Tahrir Square shows

in the starkest terms that, whilst the February Revolution achieved the ousting of the Mubarak family from power and the de facto freedom to demonstrate, to strike, to form independent unions and new political parties, these gains are face repeated attacks from the military regime of Mubarak's close friend Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi.

Tantawi heads the 18 member Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and real power lies there not with the interim government of Prime Minister Essam Sharaf. The military put Sharaf into office in March as a "reformist" screen for their continuation the old regime of repression and corruption.

On 22 July the mass upsurge once again forced him to reshuffle his cabinet and state that it had as its "first objective ... achieving the revolution's goals and preserving its gains", then Sharaf pathetically complained that the military were restricting his freedom of action. He declares his understanding and sympathy for workers demands for a real increase in the minimum wage whereas the SCAF have denounced the workers as selfish and manipulated by communists.

The role of the Islamists

Meanwhile the military ? forced to put Mubarak on trial are looking for a base of mass support to counterbalance the mass mobilisations in Tahrir and the wave of workers strikes. They need to look no further than Egypt?s Muslim brotherhood. And the talks seem to be going well. Major-General Mohamed al-Assar, a member of SCAF, told the US Institute of Peace in Washington: "Day by day, the Brotherhood are changing and getting on a more moderate track." More moderate track is code for they are willing to become tools of the military regime.

Indeed the MB is now eager to follow the highly successful electoral path of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, of Turkey?s Justice and Development Party (AKP).

The brotherhood has also been talking to US representatives and Obama too has been making friendly noises. Clearly a plan is afoot to allow the MB into government ? maybe with some capitalist liberals - under military supervision. For all the West?s talk of a fear of Islamist take over, the reality is that they would be happy with an Islamist take over as long as they were loyal adjuncts of the western powers. Something like the AKP in Turkey is fine, Hamas in Gaza is not. The MB were considered to be more akin to Hamas in their opposition to Mubarak when he was the West?s man in Cairo, but now he is gone the oppositional MB can quite happily be co-opted into the mainstream of Egyptian politics.

If this happens then the workers and democratic youth who made the revolution ? who sacrificed their lives or were tortured and imprisoned for it - are to be cheated of the fruits of the February days by the people who either were on the other side Tantawi and the military or those who played a very ambiguous part in it, the Muslim Brotherhood.

During the final phase of Mubarak's overthrow it was the outbreak of over sixty strikes, with both political and economic demands, that decided the issue of whether the old dictator had to be sacrificed. Strikes and workplace occupations have continued with peaks in April and July.

On the other hand the regime got its way in a fraudulent referendum which approved the minimal amendment of the constitution and aborted democratic elections to a sovereign constituent assembly. Instead there are to be parliamentary elections in early September and a presidential election in November.

Revolutionaries must tell the truth to the working class and heroic youth ? neither the liberals nor the Islamists will be their allies in the struggle for workers rights, women?s rights, democracy and the

international spread of the revolutions in the Arab and Muslim world. On the contrary they are the main forces of counterrevolution.

And behind them America and the European Union ? who were caught by surprise when ?their? dictators fell - are busy grooming new agents; some of them like the MB actually old enemies. That is why they are offering to load Egypt with chains of gold ? bilateral loans from G8 countries or IMF loans.

So far popular opposition to these and the neoliberal strings attached, has prevented the government acceding to them. But if the counterrevolutionary forces win a ?democratic mandate? in September-November, doubtless the new administration would eagerly accept. These chains would be the usual conditions - privatisation, austerity, opening up Egypt to the multinationals.

Democracy and socialism

So how is the left, particularly the revolutionary socialist groups ? still only hundreds strong ? going to mount resistance to a ?democratic counterrevolution?? First as most are doing, they must address the workers mobilising in defence of their wages and conditions, especially the new trade unions and win them to political not just economic struggle. This means fighting for a working class political party.

Revolutionaries need to fight for such a party to have a revolutionary programme, which includes all the most important and unfulfilled democratic demands of the revolution: the release of all political prisoners and the disbandment of military prison camps and tribunals: the handing over of all the wealth of the military. It must not duck the question of opposing the imposition of any form of religious law, separating religious bodies from the state and the school the universities and the hospitals and defending religious minorities from all persecution and discrimination.

It must include help for the Palestinian Syrian and Libyan uprisings. Democratic demands must culminate in stopping the democratic counterrevolution in its tracks. This means the cancellation of the presidential and parliamentary elections and the convening of a sovereign constituent assembly whose delegates are recallable by their electors.

It must also include demands which meet workers urgent needs, a minimum living wage for all workers, socially useful jobs for the unemployed, projects for housing, improved sanitary conditions, clean water supply in the shantytowns and workers quarters etc. All to be paid for by taxing the rich, the corporations, confiscating the ill-gotten gains of the political and military elite.

It should also include demands that are transitional ? which do not limit themselves to solutions that leave the capitalists in full ownership and control of the economy. These should start from workers? control and inspection of the factories and banks which refuse wage rises, threaten sackings or deny workers rights. They should culminate in calls for renationalisation of privatised firms and the nationalisation of all large scale private firms including the banks - foreign as well as Egyptian

Clearly no government made up of the capitalist parties, Islamist or secular liberal, can carry out such a programme. For this a workers and poor peasants? government will be needed. This will not come via the face of the September elections. Of course if a workers party, or even workers candidates from the militant unions, can mount a challenge they should do so. The aim would be to get the maximum publicity for a revolutionary programme. Though here the reactionary old constitution is a massive obstacle.

But a workers and peasants? government can only become a real prospect if the revolution which began in February continues and deepens both in its methods of struggle and the organisations needed to wage it. A political mass strike will be needed to start the demolition of the military regime, workers councils will be

needs both to wage the struggle and begin to take over the running of society.

It will only be completed by a mass popular insurrection, led by the workers' party, which wins over the rank and file soldiers. This is the revolutionary alternative to the 'democratic counterrevolution' being planned by Egypt's present rulers and the rulers of the US and EU. In a word the Egyptian revolution must become permanent - a transition from the necessary democratic and social issues of today to a socialist revolution.

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