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Egypt

Egypt's unfinished revolution

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Millions of young people led the uprising in Egypt with great resolve and determination, yet what happened in Egypt was much bigger and much deeper than just a youth revolution or a Facebook revolt. It is probably fair to say that this revolutionary uprising and process underway in Egypt is one of the greatest popular revolutions in modern history.

The sheer number of those participating in the uprising, as well as their percentage compared to the total population, is unprecedented and astonishing. It is estimated that between January 25 and February 11 at least 15 million people out of a population of 80 million—more than 20 percent of the population—“took part in the mass demonstrations and mobilizations that forced Mubarak to resign. A friend of mine in Cairo reminded me—and he was probably bragging a little bit—“15 million protesters is a number that exceeds the total number of people who participated in all the protests that took place in all the countries of Eastern Europe at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

It is true that young people led the charge on January 25, and it is true that most of the four hundred martyrs were under the age of thirty, but from day one young people were not alone in the streets. From day one, the Egyptian uprising was a popular revolution. From day one, millions of workers and government clerks, poor peasants, and poor housewives took part in all the mobilizations across the country.

When you walked across Tahrir Square you saw throngs of poor workers, poor peasants, struggling government clerks; you saw poor housewives who fight every day in order to keep their children somewhat fed and alive; you saw thousands of disabled people on crutches and in wheelchairs ignored by the government for decades; you saw thousands of retirees who cannot afford meat and even certain kinds of vegetables; you saw men and women, Muslim and Christian. All of these groups came to participate, came to support and to protect the youth against the regime's crackdown.

The masses of poor and working-class people who took part in the uprising—as everyone else who also took part—wanted democratic reforms. But workers and the poor also want social justice and the redistribution of the country's wealth, after thirty years of brutal privatization, impoverishment, and neoliberal policies pushed by the Mubarak regime.

It was truly a national uprising—every city and province up and down the country took part. And, believe it or not, as militant and determined as the revolutionaries were in Cairo, which got most of the media coverage in the West, the revolutionaries in other cities such as Suez and Alexandria, the second largest city in the country, were even more militant and bolder.

For example, the protesters in Cairo concentrated on Tahrir Square and bravely held it for eighteen days by fending off numerous bloody attacks by the police and Mubarak's thugs.

But in a city like Alexandria the protesters did not adopt a Tahrir Square strategy. They did not wait for the police to attack. The protesters came out every single day in the tens and hundreds of thousands from every neighborhood and street to confront the police; they fought back against police bullets and tear gas over and over again until they defeated the police.

I listened online to an amazing tape of radio communications between the police headquarters in Alexandria and police commanders in the field trying to deal with the flood of angry protesters in the ten minutes before the city fell to

the revolutionaries. In the tape police officers are begging headquarters for reinforcements to deal with what they described as massive, dangerous crowds of ten, twenty, and thirty thousand people closing in on them everywhere in the city. Headquarters is helpless because all of the officers in the field—literally all of them—are asking for reinforcements. Headquarters advises officers and units to retreat to precincts. The officers respond: “Sir, protesters are burning the precincts.” The tape dramatically ends with the commander at headquarters asking an inferior officer for an explanation for the police defeats. The officer simply told him: “Sir, it is over. The people are in the saddle.”

The Alexandria story was repeated in Suez and in city after city. Protesters marched on police precincts, on National Democratic Party (NDP) headquarters, on municipal buildings, on governors' mansions, and on and on.

And just as the revolt was massive, the celebrations that took place when Mubarak fell were breathtaking in their size and joy. On the night that Mubarak resigned, 5 million of us celebrated in Tahrir Square for twenty-four hours. I thought it must have been the largest celebration event in the country. I was corrected by friends in Alexandria, who told me: “You have a population of 20 million in Cairo and 5 million came out. We have a population of 10 million in Alexandria and 7 million of us jammed the Mediterranean Boulevard from one end of the city to the other.”

I read in books about great revolutions for social justice. I read that millions who were involved in those revolutions not only change oppressive social institutions but they also rediscover their humanity in the process. I must say that I am lucky to have witnessed this process of social and human transformation firsthand in the few weeks that passed in Egypt. I have seen and talked to so many people who tell you that they feel proud of what they did; they feel that they are no longer strangers in their own country; they feel human for the first time in their lives.

I have never seen so many millions in Egypt look more proud—so proud of what they and other revolutionaries have accomplished, so proud that they have done what they themselves never believed they could do. People look more relaxed and at peace and you can see it on their faces. They tell you: Gone are the days when we felt helpless and little, gone are the days when the police could humiliate us and torture us, gone are the times when the rich and the businessmen think they could run the country as if it was their own private company.

Everywhere people posted the January 25 revolution stickers—on their cars, in coffee shops, in their homes. Thousands of young people formed committees to clean the dirty streets in their neighborhoods. Thousands of others donated blood to those injured in the uprising. Young artists painted revolutionary graffiti rejecting corruption and celebrating equality between Muslims and Christians everywhere. Egyptians even started standing in line at stores and in government buildings out of respect for others—something you don't usually see in Cairo. In the days and weeks after February 11, one could sense intense excitement and hope in the air. Indeed, the revolutionary uprising brought big and amazing changes. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces—which dumped Mubarak in an attempt to save the entire social system and rules the country for the time being—made significant concessions to the revolution under intense popular pressure.

For example, the Council arrested some of Mubarak's corrupt political and business allies and froze their assets. It also froze Mubarak's own assets and promised to put him on trial.

Today, we can watch many much-hated corrupt figures on television screens, not smoking cigars in fancy meetings, but wearing prison clothes and awaiting trial. Today we watch the much-despised former minister of the interior who ordered the shooting of protesters, not walking like an arrogant despot spitting in our faces and brutalizing opposition figures or innocent people—we watch them in prison clothes and awaiting trial.

The arrests and trials of some high-profile corrupt officials were and still are a great source of euphoria for millions. But many ordinary people also realize that they made the revolution not just to punish a few figures in the old regime,

they revolted in order to change the whole regime.

Therefore, for many, Mubarak's ouster represents only the beginning of the revolution, not the end. Their slogan very quickly became: In every corner of Egypt, in every factory, school, and company, there are 1,000 small corrupt and criminal Mubaraks that we have to fight against and get rid of.

On February 12, only hours after Mubarak resigned, workers, students, and even the oppressed Coptic minority all immediately began organizing to end decades of exploitation and oppression. Millions of poor and oppressed people have been engaging in amazing and inspiring actions for social justice and democratization of all aspects of society.

But of course the Egyptian ruling class—which is wounded and shaken by the revolutionary upsurge—is still quite powerful and is fighting back to preserve its rule and privileges, and is doing so with the help of and under the leadership of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces which is a sanitized name for what is actually Mubarak's own army generals.

In other words, immediately after Mubarak fell, an intense period of social and class struggle opened up in the country. Millions of workers and students began to try and shape the outcome of the revolutionary uprising through a series of daring and brave new rounds of struggle. I want to give you a sense of some of these struggles and I will start with the unfolding workers' uprising.

There is no doubt that the strikes by industrial workers which took place on February 9 across Egypt were a key reason why Mubarak's generals in the army decided that he must go, before the revolutionary uprising could gain more depth and fervor and threaten the whole social system.

The Council was definitely correct to be concerned. Starting February 12, hours after Mubarak quit, workers all over the country—every single day, in the public and private sectors—have been striking, protesting, or sitting in. Oil workers, teachers, nurses, bus drivers, janitors, journalists, pharmacists, all the way to clerks in posh country clubs have been organizing and protesting.

Workers' demands vary from one sector to another but they revolve more or less around four main issues:

- 1) Workers everywhere want to raise wages and benefits.
- 2) Workers want permanent status for the millions who have been working as temps, sometimes on contracts as short as three months.
- 3) In the public sector, workers want an end to the neoliberal policies of privatization of companies. Moreover, many are calling for the re-nationalization of companies that were privatized and sold to investors at below-market values.
- 4) Finally, and this goes to the heart of the struggle for economic democracy, workers in the public sector are demanding the ousting of all corrupt CEOs appointed by Mubarak. In Mahalla, 24,000 textile workers struck last month, ousted the corrupt CEO, and forced the army to accept their own nominee for replacement.

And it is the same story in other factories and companies across the country: workers' expectations are very high, workers' militancy and confidence is phenomenal.

Two weeks ago, near my house in central Cairo, I witnessed one of those militant strikes firsthand. Twelve hundred government printing workers who produce school curriculum books went on strike to protest low salaries (an average of \$100 per month), the outrageous salary of the CEO (\$60,000 per month), disrespectful treatment at work, temporary work contracts, and terrible healthcare provisions. Three hundred workers attempted to rush the building to get to the CEO's office, but an army unit stopped them. So, the strikers laid siege to the company building and locked their corrupt CEO in his office on the fifth floor for thirty-six hours. The army officer in charge, along with a union representative, negotiated all the workers' demands with the CEO for twenty-four hours. The army officer forced the CEO to concede 90 percent of the workers' demands so he could disperse them. The CEO caved in. The army officer and the union representative came down and announced the settlement. The strikers were ecstatic and almost dispersed.

But the agreement did not include the rehiring of temporary workers. Some angry young workers whose temporary contracts had been recently terminated were infuriated and attempted to storm the building again. Meanwhile, an older, militant, woman clerk pleaded with the rest of the workers not to abandon the youth. Most of the crowd decided to stay. They sent the union representative and the army officer back upstairs to tell the CEO to reinstall all temporary workers and offer them permanent contracts immediately, instructing the union rep not to come down again without a "yes" on all demands. These types of militant strikes, sit-ins, and hunger strikes are taking place all over the country every day.

Workers are also breaking with the government-run Trade Union Federation and are forming independent unions. A section of militant workers are also in the process of forming a new political party, the Workers' Democratic Party.

I want to briefly take a look at the students' initiatives and struggles. When the army finally opened schools and universities, millions of students, teachers, and university professors—many of whom were part of the January 25 uprising—opened a new front of struggle. In one university after another, mass student and faculty rallies are taking place to elect all college presidents and deans in order to get rid of all those appointed by Mubarak. In some universities, students are camping out *À la Tahrir* to win their demands. And in all colleges, the students forced the government to finally implement a year-old court order to remove the secret police from all campuses.

High school and middle school students also formulated their demands and grievances. They rallied to demand an end to corporal punishment and removal of all sections in the curriculum that refer to Mubarak's so-called accomplishments. The ministry of education complied.

A wave of struggles for democratization is sweeping every corner and sector of society. Journalists are ousting pro-Mubarak editors. Cinema actors and workers rebelled against their autocratic union president. Soccer referees are threatening to strike over pay. Non-soccer athletes are demanding that sports clubs stop spending all their money on soccer players. The Boy Scouts of Egypt are demanding elections, and on and on. Fans are boycotting many of their once-beloved famous actors and singers who supported Mubarak.

Soccer fans go to soccer games, but very few fans actually bother to watch and cheer for their team. Organized fan groups that took part in the revolution and lost many martyrs are angry that their idols, the big-time famous players, did not show up in Tahrir and that some of them openly supported Mubarak. The fans taunt those players at games with angry chants and with huge banners. One of these banners at a recent game read: "We supported you every second and everywhere but where were you when we needed you?" When the uprising in Libya began, fans went to a game with a big banner in the colors of the Libyan, Tunisian, and Egyptian flags; it read: "The Free Republic of North Africa." At every game you find hundreds still chanting against Mubarak and the former minister of interior, or chanting to remove the governors.

But, the unfurling of these revolutionary forces across society has met from day one with vicious opposition from the

ruling class. The Egyptian ruling class—which is quite strong and more established than say the Qaddafi regime—this ruling class is using all its ideological and sometimes repressive powers to fight back in order to end, or at least slow down, this flood of struggle and high expectations among workers and the poor.

For example, since February 12, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces has followed a policy of rejecting—or stalling—every popular demand of the January 25 revolution in order to demoralize people. The Council initially rejected the popular demand to dismiss the last cabinet appointed by Mubarak. The Council also rejected the demand to dismantle the entire secret police apparatus and vowed that it would only reform it.

The Council daily denounces striking workers and calls on them to return to work. In some cases it has tried to arrest strikers.

The remnants of the NDP and the secret police burned a Coptic church in Helwan, south of Cairo—in order to incite a civil war atmosphere between Muslims and Christians and in this way split the revolutionary camp. Again, while the army stood watching, thugs organized by the NDP and the secret police attacked Christians who were protesting the church burning in one poor Cairo neighborhood—they killed nine and injured dozens.

More recently, the army refused to draft a new constitutional declaration—and insisted on forcing people to vote on nine amendments to the 1971 dictatorial document. Moreover, the army brutalized protesters at Tahrir Square on March 9 with electric batons and tortured those it arrested for hours in its field headquarters in the Egyptian Museum. I have to be honest, for a few moments towards the end of February into the first days of March, there was a widespread feeling of anxiety among millions who supported the revolution that all was not going well, that the revolution was under siege at best—or that the counterrevolutionary forces were actually winning at worst. Fortunately, a deep reservoir of revolutionary aspirations and readiness to struggle to win our demands turned things around in a matter of seventy-two hours.

First, mass demonstrations and an unrelenting popular opposition forced the Council to dismiss the Mubarak cabinet on March 3. On March 4, while millions were celebrating this victory, revolutionaries laid siege to the headquarters of the secret police in Alexandria and shut it down. The next day, protesters marched on secret police headquarters in city after city. In some places, protesters occupied these buildings, freed political prisoners in torture chambers, and walked out with tons of secret documents detailing repression and torture.

This courageous move by thousands of protesters forced the army to occupy and shut down all secret police headquarters. A week later, as millions were still reading through the leaked documents, the army finally dismantled that heinous institution and arrested tens of its officers, charging them with corruption and torture.

The dismissal of Mubarak's appointed cabinet and the defeat of the secret police gave a tremendous boost to everyone who supports the revolution.

The same week, mass mobilizations by Christians to protest the burning of the church in Helwan brought one more important victory to the side of the revolution. Tens of thousands of Christians, along with large numbers of Muslim supporters, occupied the north side of Tahrir Square, laying siege to the state television building to demand that the army rebuild the burned church and provide equality and protection to Christians. After an amazing eight-day occupation, reminiscent of the great occupation of the square in January, the army finally caved in and rebuilt the church.

It was not only a great victory for Christians who have been systematically discriminated against for decades. But, more importantly, widespread solidarity from Muslims with Christian protesters at the television building and

elsewhere in the country reignited a sense of common destiny and so far has defeated the counter-revolutionaries' divide-and-conquer schemes.

Whither Egypt?

The next few days and weeks in Egypt will witness a continuation of the social and class polarization that erupted after February 11. On the one hand, the Supreme Council and the new Cabinet have escalated their antirevolutionary rhetoric and measures. They are supported by large sections of the frightened middle classes and, of course, the wealthy.

For example, this week the Cabinet announced a draconian law that would criminalize certain protests and strikes in periods of emergency in the future.

In addition, the army attempted to use force to break up a ten-day-old sit-in by students in the Faculty of Mass Communications at Cairo University demanding the dismissal of the corrupt Dean.

Both the army and the cabinet can now rely on a new ally in their campaign for "stability" and "law and order": the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic Fundamentalist Group. The Muslim Brotherhood and the more reactionary fundamentalists campaigned vigorously to pass the cosmetic constitutional changes proposed by the Supreme Council. These groups turned the referendum on those changes into a referendum on the "Islamic" identity of the country. They told people that it was their religious duty to vote "yes" in order to prevent the establishment of a secular state with equal rights for the minority Christians.

Incredibly, in their demagogic effort, the Muslim Brotherhood formed a de facto bloc with their former jailers, Mubarak's National Democratic Party, which is discredited but yet to be dismantled—the only other political group in the country to support the army's proposals. In other words, and to the benefit of the old regime, the fundamentalists are attempting to polarize the country on religious lines and thus weaken the incredible unity between Muslims and Christians forged since January 25.

Remnants of the old secret police, meanwhile, are attempting to wreak havoc in the country through a campaign of fires aimed at ministry of interior buildings to cover their past crimes, and threats to assassinate public figures who support the revolution such as Mohamed El Baradai and Kefaya leader George Ishaq.

However, in the last two weeks, we have also seen a number of positive developments on the side of those who support the revolution. First, a growing minority who initially supported the Supreme Council and believed the lie that it aims to defend the revolution is rethinking its position. During the month of March, the Council and its cabinet daily showed their contempt for the masses of poor people to the point where the new prime minister compared strikers to street thugs.

Youth organizations that sprang up during and after the January 25 revolution have started in recent weeks to publicly criticize the timidity of the Supreme Council in meeting the revolution's demands for democracy and social justice—something you could not do in the first few weeks after February 11. Moreover, many activists and ordinary people are drawing the conclusion that the army is complicit in all counterrevolutionary actions.

To challenge the Council's timidity, youth organizations called for mass mobilizations on Friday April 1 under the slogan "Save the Revolution." On that day, hundreds of thousands of protesters took to the streets in Cairo,

Alexandria, and cities across the country to call on the generals to listen to their demands.

The mood in Tahrir Square and elsewhere was militant and ecstatic. People came with signs, banners, and chants that put the generals on notice. The protesters gave the Council an ultimatum of one week to arrest the former president Mubarak and put him on trial for corruption and murder. In Tahrir Square, tens of thousands attended a popular trial for the deposed dictator presided over by well-known radical judges.

And for the first time, thousands chanted against General Mohamed Tantawi, the head of the Supreme Council and Mubarak's former minister of defense. Protesters demanded an end to all military trials, complete freedom of assembly and workers' right to strike, the dismantling of Mubarak's National Democratic Party, and the arrest of many top corrupt officials.

These mass mobilizations forced the army to flinch. In less than twenty-four hours after the protests, the Supreme Council ordered the Cabinet to speed up the arrests of corrupt officials and those who are responsible for murdering protesters during the revolutionary uprising.

Secondly, workers' strikes continue to spread and to become more militant. For example, for two weeks, thousands of media workers carried out an incredibly militant sit-in inside and outside the giant building of the government-owned television and radio service near Tahrir Square. They demanded the democratization of the institution, higher wages, and the removal of all CEOs and managers who supported Mubarak and spread lies about the January 25 revolution. The protesters threatened to take the television station off the air if their demands were not met, and for days they chased hated managers in corridors and on stairways. Finally, on April 2, 2011, the day after the mass mobilizations of April 1, the Supreme Council removed the top leadership of the TV and Radio Services—a clear victory for the media workers.

In late March, railway workers shut down all train movements in the south of the country, cutting off all entries and exits to the tourist cities of Luxor and Aswan to push their demands for fair wages.

Meanwhile, workers continue to build new independent unions, breaking from the government-controlled Trade Union Federation. On March 25, thousands of mass transit workers—whose strike during the January 25 uprising was instrumental in paralyzing Cairo and in bringing down Mubarak—announced the formation of an independent union after a four-year struggle against the government-run union federation.

The same day hundreds of nurses, workers, and doctors at Manshiat Al Bakri Hospital in Cairo announced the birth of one united independent union after two months of feverish protests and organizing. Mahalla textile workers whose struggle is widely seen as one of the main sources of inspiration and many others are also forming new independent unions.

All these groups of workers are joining the newly formed Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions. Three weeks ago, workers' strikes and protests forced the current Cabinet to change the old labor laws and to recognize all independent unions.

Political parties

In the days after February 11, thousands of Egyptians began to form all sorts of new political parties.

The once-banned Muslim Brotherhood and disparate Islamist groups are scrambling to form new political parties. The leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood has announced that it will form a political party similar in outlook to the Islamic Welfare Party in Turkey. The Brotherhood has struck a tacit alliance with the Supreme Council and offers itself now as a force for stability and law and order. To prove its allegiance to the Council, the Brotherhood refuses to support workers' strikes and also declined to support the April 1 mobilization, calling for patience and more time for the Cabinet. The Islamist fundamentalists are also mobilizing a reactionary campaign to Islamize society. Its supporters are denouncing women who do not wear the headscarf and demonizing Christians. Whereas the Brotherhood assures everyone that it will respect women and minority rights, the fundamentalists are calling for the implementation of strict Sharia laws, such as cutting off the hands of those who steal.

On the other hand, many liberal figures and forces announce a new party almost on a daily basis. Most of these parties are developing a left-liberal program or a social democratic platform for change.

Similarly, workers and the left are also initiating their own organizations and parties to fight for workers' demands and a radical democracy. For example, hundreds of militant trade unionists have come together to initiate the Workers Democratic Party. Also, hundreds of socialists, progressives, and unionists are forming a broad left party called the Socialist Popular Alliance.

In universities, majorities of professors and teaching staffs have been supporting and joining all kinds of student mobilizations to democratize the campuses.

On a neighborhood level, popular committees to defend the revolution—initiated by socialists and other activists in Tahrir—have spread to more than eleven governorates and have organized several thousand in mobilizations around social justice issues and to purge all remnants of the Mubarak regime.

And whereas the Supreme Council and the Cabinet ignored women in all their appointments of ministers and constitutional committees, women play a much bigger role in new unions, left parties, and the popular committees to defend the revolution.

Conclusion

It is fair to say that most of what the Egyptian revolution achieved in democratic changes after February 11 can only be attributed to massive popular pressure and courageous mobilizations of thousands of revolutionaries such as the marches on the secret police headquarters or the April 1 demonstrations.

Millions of those who support the revolution have not yet joined in some of these activities. As time passes and promises by those defending the old system are broken, the revolutionaries could win over millions of new recruits to their efforts to finish off the Mubarak regime. And as millions join this revolutionary wave across the Arab world, the balance of forces will continue to tip against the old order.

Meanwhile, all current organizing efforts by workers, students, and other revolutionaries provide the basis both for much bigger rounds of struggle and an alternative to the reactionary projects of the old ruling class and the Islamic fundamentalists.

As one revolutionary put it: "The Spring of the Egyptian Revolution has just started."

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This article is based on a speech given at the Left Forum conference in New York City on March 20, and has been expanded by the author.