

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3523>



Egypt

Standing against the counterrevolution

- IV Online magazine - 2014 - IV475 - August 2014 -

Publication date: Saturday 9 August 2014

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On May 20, an Egyptian court sentenced Mahienour el-Massry, a member of the Revolutionary Socialists, to a two-year prison term for the "crime" of holding a protest without permission from authorities. Mika Minio spoke to Mahienour before she was jailed for an interview that was first published at Red Pepper.

In January, Mahienour el-Massry, an Egyptian revolutionary from Alexandria, was sentenced in absentia to two years in prison for organizing a protest outside the trial of two policemen who killed Khaled Said—the young man whose death bought thousands of people to the streets in a pivotal moment before the 2011 revolution. Mahienour wasn't arrested, but that didn't mean she was safe—the police could have arrested her from her home any day. She refused to go into hiding—attending meetings, travelling to Cairo, sleeping in her house.

Mahienour is a Revolutionary Socialist and a vocal opponent of both the military and the Muslim Brotherhood. After the army took power last summer, she set up support structures for refugees—especially Syrians and Palestinians—who were persecuted. Active for years on environmental justice struggles, Mahienour had begun organizing with frontline communities in the Nile Delta on climate change.

I spent several months earlier this year trying to interview my friend Mahienour, but each time, she would deflect, encouraging others to speak or arguing that her voice wasn't important. On 20 May, Mahienour attended her own appeal, along with six of her already imprisoned co-defendants. They lost in a farcical court hearing, and Mahienour was arrested.

Since being imprisoned, Mahie has continued to struggle, organizing other inmates in Damanhour Prison and writing letters from her prison cell. During her last court hearing on June 28, she led chants from inside the prisoners' cage. Because of her humility, I was unable to get a long interview from Maheinour, so this is a compilation of several shorter conversations from April 2014.

How do you feel about the current context, with Gen. Abdul-Fattah el-Sisi about to be elected as president?

It's very painful. After all the exhilaration and hope of the last years, it's difficult to believe that this is happening. At the same time, Sisi can't feed the people. He doesn't have the social or economic solutions to the crisis.

And over time, people won't buy it. Especially the younger generation, who don't believe in the state. Those over 50 lived under Anwar Sadat and Gamal Abdel Nasser—they experienced a strong state. But the state is unable to control young people's minds—its discourses can't hold.

Now that both the Muslim Brotherhood and leftist revolutionaries face repression, is it time to make up and ignore past differences?

Definitely not. However leftists interact with the Brotherhood, we must not forget their collusion and cooperation with the state, especially during Morsi's rule.

There was a Muslim Brotherhood lawyer I knew from the first year of the revolution. Last year, when the Brotherhood was in government, he kept accusing us of all sorts of made-up charges. He was colluding with the police, trying to frame us. Now he got in touch, saying he wants to cooperate. I was furious and shouted at him.

Are you careful? Are you trying to avoid being arrested?

I'm vry careful with what I say on the phone. Before the revolution, we were cautious. We'd take batteries out, put the phone under a pot. But since the revolution started, we dropped the precautions. We didn't feel threatened. That's changed now.

But I'm not trying to avoid arrest. My friends tell me not to use my phone or Facebook, but that's not realistic. I sleep in my house and go to meetings. I'm careful about going to court to support others. I went today, but was careful.

I don't feel like it makes sense to hide. They could arrest me at any point anyway, if a policeman recognizes me, or I'm checked at a checkpoint. And I can't just wait like this, I need to be doing something useful.

Was your family supportive of your role in the revolution?

There's a lot of different politics in my familyâ€”everything possible. So I'm careful what I speak about at family gatherings.

When I was younger, my father wasn't happy about me becoming politicized. So I used to take my books on the tram around the city for hours, to read Marx. As I became more active, my mother would cover for me, so that I had an excuse for why I was out.

I've heard about how you travelled throughout the Nile Delta, meeting farmers whose fields were turning to salt. Tell me about what got you engaged with climate change.

I'm from Alexandria. So I always knew that our city might drown from climate change. We grew up seeing the cement blocks that protect the shoreline.

But it was only while researching climate change and migration with Swedish / Iranian journalist Shora Esmailian that I understood how important this is. I saw the scale of potential destruction, and how the violence of climate change is shaped by class. The poor, the small farmersâ€”they'll be affected the worst and have their lives ruined.

Then I remembered that the cement blocks in Alexandria aren't in poor areas either, like Baheri. All the sea defenses are set up to defend the rich. In other places, it's the same, like Dumyat, Ras el-Barr. Protection is built to defend tourist resorts, corporate factories like the oil infrastructure, and military installations. Not where ordinary people live.

Does it feel like people are mobilizing for just and radical ways to deal with climate change?

I hear a lot of people say, "This change is coming from outside, we can't do anything. We just have to put up with it." But there are exceptions. Especially near factoriesâ€”here people see the role of power and class.

For example, the community of Wadi Al-Qamar: They live next to a large cement factory, owned by Lafarge and

Titanâ€™ French and Greek multinational companies. The pollution is heavy, and many of the young children get asthma and bronchial diseases. So the community was fighting for years to get filters installed. Lafarge and Titan refused, and wouldn't provide medical support either. Even though they were getting government subsidies for fuel and electricity.

Workers went on strike in February 2013, demanding medical treatment. The police attacked the protest and set dogs on the workers. Two workers were thrown down two floors, and then arrested. They weren't allowed to see a doctor in prison, despite broken bones. We had to fight hard to get them out.

Now, the Lafarge cement factory is switching to using coal. That means even more pollution and illness, and much worse impacts for the climate, which affects all of us. Especially here in Egypt. So people in Wadi Al-Qamar are organizing to protest.

Egypt will be fundamentally transformed by climate change in the next 20 years. Nobody knows how exactly, but it's clear that millions will sufferâ€™especially small farmers, fisherfolk and the poor living in the cities. Yet it's easy to feel powerless, particularly with the crackdown in Egypt and the Anti-Protest Law. Do you have any hope, thinking about the future and climate change?

It depends on how climate change is tackled. Will it be led by the elite? They're not speaking to the people, even when they say they areâ€™when they claim to represent the people. Small fisherfolk and farmersâ€™they will be the most affected. But they're not organized in syndicates or collectively. That makes it difficult for them to exert power, pressureâ€™to demand a different world.

Farmers' co-operatives do exist. But these are mostly for taking fertilizers, buying materials, not for organizing. There isn't space for politics. There is a new farmers trade union, but people in the [Nile] Delta didn't know about it when I spoke to them.

After January 25, people had hope. Now, people are afraid to face the regime, especially as it's coming back more and more brutal. Activists have to think about the mistakes we made in the revolution, like when we all stuck to big slogans.

We should have divided ourselves more, to cooperate with workers, farmers, fisherfolkâ€™to grow deeper roots, amongst more people. That could have enabled the creation of a defense front. A defense front that could stand up to attacks by the state, on all those different communities and groups. Instead, we were isolated, and the military and police could pick us off one by one.

We don't have enough roots. I hear people say, "You're taking about social justiceâ€™you have the right slogans. But I haven't seen you before, supporting our struggle. And we've been fighting for a long time." But we must not get stuck in the mistakes. We should think about them to learn what to do better. And then move forward. There is hope. We have to be optimisticâ€™we don't have a choice.

First published at [Red Pepper](#).

July , 2014