

Egypt - A year of revolution and counter-revolution

As economic crisis worsens, new class conflicts loom

The 2011 revolutionary movements of young people, workers and the most downtrodden swept through north Africa and the Middle East and inspired social movements across the world. Hated dictators such as Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt were ousted from office under the pressure of street protests and waves of strikes.

But one year on the revolutions appear to have stalled and many activists are angry and frustrated at the lack of real social change. Right-wing Islamist parties have dominated parliamentary elections. David Johnson, recently in Egypt, looks at the momentous events of last year and points to how new revolutionary movements can develop. This is an extract of a longer article on www.socialistworld.net

“Egypt is like a house where the curtains have been changed but everything else is the same,” a revolutionary activist recently told CWI reporters. The 25 January 2011 demonstration started a revolutionary movement that brought down Mubarak 18 days later.

Mubarak was forced to resign by his own military leaders. Taking power themselves, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (Scaf), in effect, carried out a military coup. They understood that if he had attempted to cling on any longer, the revolutionary movement, particularly the rapidly developing strike wave, could have swept the whole ruling class away.

Since then, Egypt has swung between revolution and counter-revolution, often with movements in both directions taking place at the same time. This reflects the weakness of the Egyptian capitalist class and their inability to stabilise their rule, while, at this stage, the working class is without either a mass party or a revolutionary party to lead a successful overthrow of capitalism.

Economic crisis

Prime minister Kamal el-Ganzouri, the fourth to hold the post this year, tearfully stated recently that Egypt's economy is “worse than anyone imagines.” Economic growth for 2011 is expected to be around 1.2%, down from around 5% in 2010. Unemployment is now almost 12%, compared to 9% a year ago.

Tourism accounted for over 10% of GDP in 2010, employing one in eight of the workforce. Visitor numbers fell by a third during 2011.

Global economic crisis has contributed to this sharp fall, as well as the violent scenes seen on TV. The government and its apologists, however, blame workers' protests, for ‘putting their own agendas ahead of the greater good.’

Foreign direct investment fell 93% in the first nine months of 2011 to \$376 million. Government borrowing costs are a record high. The government has received an unusual source of help - the armed forces loaned it \$1billion in December!

Inflation topped 10% in December. 40% of the

population struggle daily to survive on less than \$2. The government is under pressure from big business to tackle the budget deficit. On 5 January it announced huge public spending cuts which will include public sector wages and energy subsidies. The government is now negotiating with the IMF for a loan, the price of which will probably include cutting food subsidies, hitting the poorest.

Scaf's falling popularity

The Scaf junta has lost much of the support it had immediately after the ousting of Mubarak in February 2011, when the army was widely viewed as having refused Mubarak's orders to carry out a Tiananmen Square-type massacre of Tahrir Square protesters. Over the next few months, it became clearer to most activists that Scaf's hand was tightening its grip on power.

After Mubarak's ousting, 150 new trade unions were formed with 1.6 million members. These are independent of the Egyptian Trade Union Federation, which had leaders appointed by the old regime. A law was introduced in late March banning strikes but - despite many strikes taking place - it was not used until July, when five workers were jailed.

A survey in July counted 22 sit-ins, 19 strikes, 20 demonstrations, ten protests and four short-term protest gatherings. The total was slightly fewer than in June, but there were more strikes. These were not only to win higher wages and secure permanent contracts, but also to clear out Mubarak's stooges from senior management.

During last summer, Friday demonstrations grew again. The government raised the minimum wage substantially (but only to LE[Egyptian pounds]700 a month - about £74 - not to LE1,200 demanded by trade unionists, and just for public sector workers). It announced increased spending on education and healthcare. Further privatisation was halted.

Reflecting the views of a section of the ruling class, one minister, Ahmed Hassan al-Borai warned: “Before the 25 January revolution, Egypt expected a social revolution and not a political one. So now it has to carry out real reforms, otherwise another social revolution could occur.”

Frustration among activists grew due to the lack of political change, leading to some re-occupying Tahrir Square on 8 July. Many groups of activists, including Islamists, agreed to hold a joint demonstration on 29 July, demanding an end to Mubarak's emergency law, public trials for Mubarak and his cronies, the prosecution of police officers and soldiers accused of attacking protesters during the revolution and more power for the civilian government.

However, when it became clear that the Islamist organisations were mobilising heavily for this demonstration, with many coaches coming in from outside Cairo, most youth and revolutionary groups boycotted it, returning to the square afterwards.

One million took part in the demonstration in what became called the ‘Day of Kandahar’, reflecting the conservative religious outlook of many taking part. There were chants in support of Scaf leader Mohamed Tantawi.

Undoubtedly, there has been behind-the-scenes collusion between Scaf and Muslim Brotherhood (MB) leaders throughout much of 2011. Emboldened by this show of support, security forces attacked the occupiers a few days later and cleared the square.

Scaf announced that they would retain control over the armed forces budget, rather than the new parliament when elected. They also reserved the right to appoint a constitutional committee to draft a new constitution. These moves sparked a massive demonstration in Tahrir Square on 18 November, in which the MB and the hardline Islamist Salafists participated - the first real challenge their leadership had made to Scaf.

The Islamists left the Square at the end of the afternoon of the 18th. Activists reoccupied it demanding an end to military rule. They were bloodily attacked over the following five days by the army and security forces, leaving 70 killed, some suffocated from unusually strong tear gas. Hundreds were injured. Showing the potential strength of workers' action, five customs officers blocked the import of seven tonnes of tear gas

from the USA.

Further brutal attacks by military and security forces on these demonstrators on 16 December left at least another 17 dead. Among the shocking scenes was that of a female demonstrator dragged along the ground being repeatedly kicked by security personnel. An angry march of 10,000 women took place a few days later in protest - the biggest women's demonstration in Egypt's history.

Election boycott

These attacks from the regime - the whip of counter-revolution - have served to further radicalise the activists. However, the gap between them and the less active masses is widening, as seen during the elections taking place since late November. Following the attacks on Tahrir Square, most activists there favoured a boycott of the elections. They correctly argued that the election process was under the control of the military and that the new parliament did not have real powers.

However, a vital task is to point the activists towards the large numbers who saw this as their first opportunity to participate in relatively free elections. Many less active workers and poor intended to vote in the elections. Many also abstained, some put off by the deliberately confusing procedure. Turnout in the first round of voting covering a third of the country, including Cairo, was 52%, although this fell in later rounds. There was a threatened LE500 fine for not voting.

Many of the more politically advanced workers and youth, particularly in the cities, were highly sceptical, if not cynical, about ‘elections’ called under the control and management of the military. This also contributed to the high abstention rate. But even if activists did not intend to take part in the voting, building support for an alternative requires intervention in election meetings, questioning and challenging candidates in front of their audience. Such debates also help activists gain better understanding of

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how to win support among the masses.

The Islamist parties did not participate in the late November and December protests, concentrating on their election campaigning.

Election results

The election procedure was very complicated, with party lists, individual lists (some with over 200 names on the ballot paper), reserved seats for ‘workers’ and ‘farmers’, and run-offs where individuals got less than 50%. At least ten candidates were prevented from standing, having been nominated for worker seats by new independent unions and not the Egyptian Trade Union Federation, led by Mubarak supporters.

The commonest breach of election law were the 20-30 members of the Islamist parties campaigning right outside polling stations as people went to vote.

The MB stood as the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) and won around 235 seats (47%). The Salafists of Al-Nour (‘Light’) came second with around 120 seats (27%). Their support was highest in the poorest areas, neglected by the other parties.

The two biggest Liberal blocs have 68 between them. The sixth largest group, with ten seats, is Revolution Continues, the left bloc of which the Popular Socialist Alliance is the biggest component. Its vote varied between 1% and 19%. In rural areas, a few former members of Mubarak's NDP have been elected with new party labels.

These results do not reflect the real balance of forces, seen in the mass revolutionary movements and in the strikes last summer and autumn. With no mass workers' party at this stage, the working class has not been able to express itself in this election as a class. Genuine independent trade unions need to develop a political voice and could play a key role in helping to establish such a party, along with socialists and other revolutionary activists.

The MB's Freedom and Justice Party are styling themselves on Turkish prime minister Recep Erdogan's Justice and Development Party, trying

to present a moderate and modern image. They had 46 female candidates on their lists and were in an alliance with some small parties that included two Coptic candidates.

The MB's long record of opposition to Mubarak, their charitable and welfare programmes and being viewed as relatively incorrupt all helped explain their vote. However, their programme is aimed to appeal to business, including reducing the budget deficit and cutting subsidies. Many of their leaders come from a business background, such as ‘deputy supreme guide’ Khairat El-Shater, a wealthy tycoon. They will inevitably disappoint those who voted for them with high hopes of improved living conditions.

The MB is seeking coalition partners. Its preferred partners would be small liberal parties, giving the regime some sort of claim to be linked to the revolutionary events, from which the MB leadership stood back until it appeared that Mubarak's days were numbered. Such partners would also make a MB government more acceptable to capitalist governments around the world (and the IMF), to whom it would look for economic support.

Sections of MB youth had already split away in disagreement with the leadership's policy of standing aside from direct confrontation with Mubarak or Scaf. Now the election for the lower assembly is over, the demand for the immediate ending of Scaf's rule could gain massive support, although the MB leaders are more likely to continue to compromise with them.

Activists and masses

The liberals' almost exclusive concentration on democratic demands and secularism gets little echo among those struggling daily to feed their families. It is clear that the gap in outlook between many Tahrir activists and the masses in the poor districts of Cairo and elsewhere has grown.

This growing isolation of activists has emboldened the state and the pro-big business MB to launch attacks in recent weeks on the NGOs and

the Revolutionary Socialists (RS), the Egyptian section of the International Socialist Tendency.

This is a serious threat to the left in general. The RS worked with the MB a few years ago. Now they complain that the MB is being used as a “tool of the state” and appeal to its memory of being oppressed by this same state machine.

It is vital for the socialist movement to undermine support for both the MB and the Salafists. This cannot be done by appealing to the leadership of these organisations, or by falling into the trap of debating Islamism and secularism (portrayed as atheism to many practising Muslims). Instead, a programme that could appeal to poor and working class supporters of the Islamists, demanding jobs, decent pay, housing, good education and free health care is needed.

A mass workers' movement is required that could fight for this programme and unite Muslims and Copts, men and women, young and old around it. The Islamist parties would fracture along class lines if this were built with a revolutionary leadership explaining the need to sweep out the capitalist system responsible for poverty and oppression.

Socialist revolution

The need for a second revolution is becoming clearer to many who took part in the 25 January 2011 uprising and the many demonstrations and battles since. But what sort of revolution is needed, and how can it be achieved? The first revolution has only ‘changed the curtains’ - the political representatives of the ruling class, which has kept its wealth and power.

A second revolution is needed to take into public ownership and place under democratic workers' control and management all the big companies, banks and large estates. The economy could then be planned for the benefit of the majority instead of the tiny elite that grew wealthier under Mubarak and still maintain their riches under Scaf.

Working class power in the developing strike wave of February 2011 ended Mubarak's struggle to hang on. Some of that power has been seen in the year since, although no workers' party has yet been able to draw together activists in the trade unions, socialists and the masses.

A democratic socialist planned economy would use the wealth produced by the majority for the benefit of all, instead of having it stolen by the capitalists and their military and political defenders.

The popular neighbourhood committees that started to develop after 25 January, together with democratic workplace committees, could redevelop and expand on the basis of new revolutionary upsurges and be the basis for genuine democracy, linking these together at local, regional and national level. A democratically elected constituent assembly could draw up a constitution that would defend the rights of all, including religious and national minorities.

In the course of fighting for such a socialist programme, the balance of forces in society would change. All defenders of the existing order would increasingly be forced together in opposition to the growing movement of the masses, led by the working class. Such a movement would overcome sectarian divisions and result in a completely different assembly to that which has just been elected. A majority government of workers and poor would act in the interests of the majority in society.

At the same time, the deepening global economic crisis is undermining support for capitalism around the world. If the working class develops a decisive revolutionary socialist leadership, seriously struggling to take power in Egypt, it could ignite further revolutionary movements, laying the basis for a socialist Middle East, north Africa and world.

see www.socialistworld.net

The Committee for a Workers' International (CWI)

The Committee for a Workers' International (CWI) is the socialist international organisation to which the Socialist Party is affiliated. The CWI is organised in 45 countries and works to unite the working class and oppressed peoples against global capitalism and to fight for a socialist world.

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