

Egypt in movement (L’Egypte en mouvement)

--SAMIR AMIN

Egypt is a cornerstone in US plans for domination of the planet, and Washington will not tolerate any attempt by Egypt to move out of its orbit of total submission, which is also required by Israel in order for it to pursue its continued colonization of what remains of Palestine. This was the exclusive objective of Washington in its ‘involvement’ in the orchestration of a “soft transition”. In this respect, the US experienced little or no difficulty in coming to the conclusion that Mubarak should resign—especially once it became clear that he was not amenable to undertaking radical reforms or that the Egyptian people were unprepared to accept his remaining in office even if he did. The attempt to hand over control to appointed Vice President, Omar Soliman, head of the Army Intelligence, proved unconvincing and unsuccessful. In any event, the Army was careful not to associate itself with repression of the uprisings, thus maintaining its image.

Additionally, in terms of US strategy, the Egyptian system was not embodied in Mubarak, but the people adopted him as one symbol—a point of departure. A few hours after Mubarak nominated Omar Suleiman as vice president, the people began chanting the slogan: “No Mubarak, no Suleiman, they are two Americans.” US President Obama intimated that the US wanted a soft transition, something along the lines of what transpired in the Philippines; however, the Egyptian people wish to get rid of all criminals—not just one—and they desire a genuine transition not a farce. There is a very high degree of political consciousness. Nevertheless, the US objective is a pro-American transition facilitated by opening negotiations with the right and the center—with the Ikhwān al-Muslimīn--the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and eventually some bourgeois democrats—in order to isolate the left and the youth. With our without concessions, the Americans realized that Mubarak would be out, and an invitation to so-called ‘negotiation’ was initiated by vice president Soleiman. For its part, the Muslim Brotherhood leadership is savvy; and while they did not surrender, they did accept the concept of negotiations within the system.

El-Baradei entered onto the scene publicly at that point, and while he is still better known outside Egypt than he is inside, he could potentially remedy that. He is a “liberal”, having no concept of or initiative for the management of the economy other than the maintaining the status quo and appears incapable of comprehending that this is precisely at the root origin of the present social devastation. He is a democrat in the sense that he wants “genuine elections” and respect for the rule of law (with a cessation of extra-legal arrests and torture) but nothing more. It is not impossible that El-Baradei could yet be a partner in the transition; although, the Army and intelligence will not abandon their dominant position in the control of Egyptian society, and it remains to be seen whether or not he will accept this. In terms of the question as to whether or not the masses of those who demonstrated—and the youth in particular—*are* or *are not* anti-American, it should be noted that many democrats are neutral and not against the Americans. On the other hand, El Baradei would be rather naïve if he imagines that the Americans are for democracy. Among that which has been and ought to be voiced repeatedly is that the objective of the US is *not* democracy.

In the event of a “success” in a soft transition with “elections”, the Muslim Brotherhood will become the major parliamentary force. The US would welcome this as its policy makers have determined the Brotherhood to be adequately “moderate”, or—in more frank terms—to be sufficiently docile and accepting of submission to US strategy, thereby leaving Israel free to continue its occupation of Palestine. The Brotherhood also favors and fully supports the prevailing extant “market” system, which is entirely externally dependent. They are also, in point of fact, partners in the “comprador” ruling class, where they took a position against the working class strikes and the peasants struggles in order to retain their ownership of land. The US plan for Egypt is very similar to the Pakistani model with an amalgam of “political Islam” and Army intelligence. Within such a scheme, the MB could potentially compensate for their alignment with such a policy precisely by being “immoderate” in their behavior towards the Copts, even if such would clash directly with international norms and concepts of what constitutes “democracy”.

Spontaneity of the uprisings

Part of that which explains the impetus for the uprisings is that people have grown weary of the dictates of the Americans. Egyptians are dedicated nationalists, and so there is a general questioning as to ‘How can we have sunk so low that the American ambassador and president can dictate everything, every day?’ There is social degradation and unemployment and poverty are increasing for the majority. Inequality and income disparity is cataclysmic, and all these factors taken in aggregate meant that the government had no legitimacy. Now, this situation is no more—suddenly, there were explosions—people were killed—and the dynamic is different.

Another factor in the spontaneity and massive scale of the turnout in the demonstrations is that the people had reached their limits of endurance with the status quo and with the police. In the Mubarak era, if a person happened to be arrested—even for a minor infraction such as running a traffic light—there was a high probability that he would be subjected to beating or torture. Police repression and torture occurred on a daily basis with despicable impunity.

Over and above this, people are no longer able to tolerate the endemic mafia system. The entrepreneurs whom the World Bank says are ‘the future’ are gangsters. They obtained their fortunes by selling off land—given to them by the state for nothing—for building projects. It is wealth accumulated via dispossession, and they are squeezing the genuine entrepreneurs.

The Major Components of the Egyptian movement

What transpired in Egypt was that the movement was initiated by the youth, joined immediately by the radical left and the following day by the bourgeois democrats. A fact which must be known is that the Muslim Brotherhood boycotted the protests for the first four days because they presumed the movement would be defeated by the police, but when they saw that the movement could not be defeated, the leadership could not stay out, and they moved in.

A pivotal question revolves around the nature of the composition of the Egyptian movement behind the uprisings in regard to the parameters of the government that will ultimately emerge. The movement was largely comprised of urban youth, and particularly holders of diplomas with no jobs, supported by segments of the educated middle classes--democrats. While the new regime could perhaps make some concessions--expand recruitment for the apparatuses of state, for instance -- it could hardly do more without more radical changes to its structure. Of course, matters could change if the working class and peasant movements were to move in, but this does not seem to be on the agenda. Furthermore, as long as the economic system is managed in accordance with the rules of the "globalization game", none of the endemic problems which resulted in the protest movement in the first can be actually be solved. The set of logical predictable outcomes can be circumscribed accordingly, where an absence of genuine changes to the previous system--where globalization militates strongly against such--will preclude remedy of the social and economic ills underpinning the crisis.

There are four primary components of the opposition, which comprise the massive popular movement in Egypt: 1) the youth--'re-politicized' by their free will via the 'modern' means which they have utilized and contrived (e.g., FaceBook); 2) forces of the radical left; 3) the middle-class democrats; and 4) segments of the Muslim Brotherhood.

1) The first component of the opposition is constituted by politicized young people, who are highly organized and more than one million strong when mobilized, which is a significant number. These are opposed to the prevailing social and economic system. Whether they are anti-capitalist is a question which proves somewhat too theoretical for them, but they are against social injustice and growing inequality. They are nationalist in the positive sense, they are anti-imperialist. They despise the subjugation and submission of Egypt to US hegemony and are therefore against so-called 'peace' with Israel, which tolerates brutalization of Palestinians in Israel's continued colonization of occupied Palestine. They are democratic, being diametrically opposed to the dictatorship of the army and the police. They have decentralized leaderships, which when they gave the order to demonstrate, initially mobilized one-million persons. However, within a few hours, the actual figure was not one million, but fifteen million, all throughout the entire nation, and in the far flung quarters of small towns and villages, as well. Their mobilization effected an immediate and tremendous positive echo which reverberated throughout the nation.

2) The second component is the radical left, which hails from the communist tradition. The young are not anti-communist, but they do not want to be put within the framework of a party with chiefs and subject to orders. They do not have bad relations with the communists, nor is there any problem with such; and, as a result of the demonstrations, there has been a coming together--not of leadership, but of interaction.

3) The third component is the middle class democrats. The system is so dominated by the police and the mafia that many, including small businessmen, were obliged to engage in racketeering in order to survive. They are not part of the left, but accept capitalism, business and the market. Furthermore, they are not even totally anti-American; and while they do not

love Israel, they accept it. In the end, they are democrats, against the concentration of power in the hands of the army, police and the omnipresent mafia gangs. El Baradei is typical of them, he has no concept of the economy other than what it is -- the market. He does not know what socialism connotes, but he is democrat.

4) The fourth component is the Muslim Brotherhood. Even if they are possessed of a public political popular resonance, they are ultra-reactionary. Not only are they beholden to religious ideology, they are reactionaries on the ground in the social sphere. For instance, they have come out openly against the strikes of the workers, siding with the state. They believe workers should accept the market and also took a position against the peasants' movement. There is a strong movement among the middle peasants, who are menaced by the market as well as the rich peasants; and they are compelled to struggle for the right to maintain their property. The Muslim Brotherhood took a position against them, arguing that landed private property is a personal right, and that the market is sacrosanct in the Qur'ān. The Muslim Brotherhood has, in fact, been complicit with the regime; and despite appearances that the regime and Muslim Brotherhood were locked in conflict, they have actually been in collusion. The *ancien* regime surrendered control to the Muslim Brotherhood of three major institutions—vital to the state: education, justice, and state television. Through education, they have imposed the veil first for girls in school as well as for society at large. Through control over the judiciary, they introduced Islam law—*al-sharī'ah*. Through the media, they influence public opinion. The leadership has always been a corrupt political leadership comprised of very wealthy individuals, who have invariably been financed by Saudi Arabia, which means—by extension--the US. However, the Muslim Brotherhood has significant influence on two major groups: the first comprises sectors of the middle class that are pro-capitalist, anti-communist, afraid of the people, and positively disposed towards the prospect of Muslim rule who are spontaneously inclined to affiliate with the Brotherhood; and the second are the impoverished lumpen classes. The Brotherhood is very influential among strata of the middle classes, including teachers, medical doctors, and lawyers etc. At the same time, in regard to their other primary sphere of influence, they have a lumpen support base from which they recruit their paid militias. In Egypt, extreme poverty is on a vast scale, where there are 5 million people in Cairo who can be classed as totally deprived out of a total population of 15 million. Among the ranks of the very poor who have a very low level of political understanding is where the Muslim Brotherhood finds an army that they can mobilize.

The conference of the movement, which has been conducting daily discussions, is establishing the ground rules and specifications for a real transition: 1) the immediate dissolution of the fabricated assembly; 2) the immediate lifting of martial law and allowing freedom of demonstration; 3) beginning the project of drafting a new constitution; 4) specifying that the assembly elected should be a constitutional assembly; and 5) the specification that elections should neither be immediate nor rapid but should allow for a year-long period to allow various parties the time and freedom as if elections were to be conducted immediately many would vote for the Muslims simply for the reason that they are already organized.

Events can be taken to mark the beginning of a long struggle. Egypt is a country of protracted revolutions--from 1920 to 1952, with numerous ups and downs. In the long run, the youth and the left constitute the majority, with the capacity for action. A negative scenario would be the possibility of Muslim Brotherhood attacking them. They have tried, and the regime is particularly vicious. During the uprising, it opened up the prisons and released 17,000 criminals--giving them pro-Mubarak badges, arms, money, and the guarantee that they would not return to the prison in exchange for attacking the demonstrators. These criminals could not have escaped from the prison without the complicity and protection of the police. Nobody from within the opposition movement opened the prisons.

Towards the periphery: the role of workers and peasants

Three years ago, there was a wave of strikes in Egypt, which were the strongest witnessed in the African continent over the last 50 years, South Africa included. The official trade unions have been completely controlled by the state ever since the time of Nasser, in a form similar to the old Soviet model of state control over the trade union. The Egyptian strikes did not originate with trade union leadership, but rather they started from below. In this sense, it can be argued that these were spontaneous in terms of having not being initiated—in top-down fashion--by the leadership, and the strikes were hugely successful. At the time, the regime wanted to send in the police, but the companies balked, arguing that such was unfeasible, because to do so might precipitate the destruction of all the factories. Instead, they negotiated.

In point of fact, the strikes won very little in the way of concessions: a 10% or 15% increase in wages, which was less than what had been eaten away by the inflation of those years. However, the strikes did achieve something important for human dignity and for trade union rights, such as the stipulation that no one would be dismissed without the knowledge of the trade union. In other words, they established themselves as a new *independent* trade union, and they became part of the movement that brought down Mubarak.

The peasant movement is much more difficult to pinpoint. There has always been a radical movement ever since 1920. While there are *latifundias*, there are also the wealthy peasants who are very powerful in rural society since they are not the absentees, and they have relations with the government, the lawyers and the physicians. Then, there are the middle peasants, the poor and the extremely impoverished peasants, as well as the landless. Curiously, the situation of the landless, has not deteriorated in the last 30 years, because they have out-migrated to the Gulf countries for work. They managed to earn some small sums of money, which did not permit them to buy back land but which were sufficient to establish themselves in the grey, informal economic activities. The very poor are menaced because the neoliberal market allows and facilitates their expropriation by the rich peasants, new capitalist landowners, and modern Egyptian companies associated with agro-business. The only people who have undertaken to notice them and hold discussions with them were the communists--not Muslims, not bourgeois democrats. The extremely impoverished peasants are very radical and they are not anti-communist, but they simply do not know what communism is. A weakness of the communists—who made efforts to connect with them--is that they have never

been able to integrate them. In any event, nobody has decisive influence on them, but they have continued their struggles. In terms of the recent uprisings, the peasants did participate in the sense that they mobilized in the small villages, but they lack links to the global movement, and they did not, for instance, participate in the conference to discuss the post-Mubarak transition. While there have been mobilizations in small towns, the movement has primarily been urban.

Expedient Utility: the Muslim Brotherhood under Mubarak and in US strategy

The Muslim Brotherhood not only constituted the sole political force tolerated by the regime, but its expansion was actively supported. They have never been ‘moderate’, let alone democratic, and their leader or ‘guide’ (or we might say ‘führer’)—*murshid*—is self-proclaimed, while the entire association is based on the principles of discipline and unquestioning execution of the leader’s orders without any discussion. The administration of the MB is composed exclusively of the extremely wealthy, which is due among other to the financial patronage of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, that is to say, Washington. Ranged about this elite is a circle of men coming from obscurantist middle class factions who constitute the base of the masses recruited via the charitable services offered by the MB—and also financed by Saudi Arabia. Lastly, are the fighting forces comprised of paid militias recruited from the *lumpen* classes.

The Muslim Brotherhood has never been moderate, but they always attempt to depict themselves as being so because they have been asked to do so and to play such a role. They are not a religious movement but a *political* one that uses religion. Since its establishment in 1920 by the British and the monarchy, this movement has played an active role as an anti-communist, anti-progressive and anti-democratic agent. This is the *raison d’être* of the Muslim Brothers and they willingly embrace it. They openly admit that if they ever win the elections, it will be the last in the country because the electoral system is imported from the West, and as such is contrary to Islamic nature. They have not changed their position in any way in this regard; and in fact, political Islam has always been supported by the United States—despite overt intimations to the contrary. The Americans presented the Taliban movement as heroes of ‘freedom’ in the war against the Soviet Union. Subsequently, when the Taliban closed girls’ schools that had been set up by the communists, the United States kept outraged feminist movements at bay—explaining that ‘we must respect the traditions which these countries have’. This is based on a duplicitous game; they give their support on the one hand, but they use the natural excessiveness of fundamentalists instrumentally as a device to permit the refusal of immigrants and justify military aggression, on the other. In accordance with this strategy, the regime of Mubarak never contested political Islam; but to the contrary, Mubarak integrated it into his system.

If the Muslim Brotherhood is ‘moderate’, they are only so in the dual connotation of the word: that is, they have always refused to formulate any economic and social program, and in this sense, they do not oppose reactionary, neoliberal policies. Therefore, they accept de facto submission to the exigencies of the deployment of US hegemonic power in the region and across the globe. They are useful allies to Washington—and there could hardly be a more

ideal alliance than one between the US and Saudi Arabia, patron of the Brotherhood—and to legitimate this alliance, they have accorded them the honorary title of ‘democrats!’

Mubarak subcontracted Egyptian society to the Muslim Brotherhood, and he entrusted and consigned to them three fundamental institutions: justice, education and television. The military regime, however, wants to retain control of their administration—claimed by the Muslim Brotherhood—for itself. The United States utilizes this minor conflict within the alliance between the military and Islamist groups to ensure the docile compliance of both, as what is most essential for the US is that both parties accept the capitalist system as it is. The Muslim Brotherhood has never intended to change things in a serious or radical manner and, in point of fact, during the great labor strikes of 2007-2008, their parliamentary representatives voted with the government and against strikers. Furthermore, when peasants who had been expelled from their lands by major landowners in the provinces undertook a protest, the Muslim Brotherhood sided *against* the movement. So, without being inordinately sardonic, it can be said for the Muslim Brotherhood that private property, free enterprise and profit are what is *sacred* to them.

It bears stressing that both the military and the Muslim Brotherhood are compliant and accept US hegemony in the region and peace with Israel according to the status quo. Both evidence continued complacency, permitting Israel to pursue its colonization of whatever remains of the Palestinian territory of Palestine. The US cannot openly declare that its strategy aims at establishing ‘Islamic’ regimes in the region. The Americans must act as though ‘this causes them concern’ as through such a stance they are enabled to legitimize their “permanent war on terrorism” under the cover of which other objectives are achieved—such as military domination of the globe, aiming to reserve exclusive access of the US, Europe and Japan to the natural resources of the world. Another advantage inhering in this duplicity is that it permits the mobilization of ‘Islamophobic’ public opinion. Lastly, as is generally known, Europe does not have particular strategies in regard to the region but is content to remain a bystander--outside of the fray and simply observing--while decisions are taken in Washington.

Now, more than ever, it is imperative to expose and debunk the appalling duplicity of US strategy about which public opinion is manipulated proficiently so that people are duped, unaware. The US, followed by Europe, as a matter of fact, are most afraid of the possible eventuality of genuine democratic rule in Egypt that would certainly jeopardize Egyptian allegiance to neoliberal economics and the aggressive strategy followed by the US and NATO. They are prepared to do whatever necessary to prevent Egypt from becoming democratic and would support—by all possible means and with great duplicity, the false ‘alternative’ of the Muslim Brotherhood who are only present in a minority in the popular movement in Egypt calling for genuine change.

The latest developments

To summarize, what has occurred thus far in Egypt is as follows. Mubarak did not resign, but rather was dismissed—along with his appointed vice president Omar Suleiman—

in a coup d'état by the head of the army. This new official leadership of the army claims that it will hold power until the new elections can be organized then the army will return to its barracks. Meanwhile, the army is responsible for the transition. In terms of major implications, the current Egyptian revolution illustrates the possible end of the so called 'neo-liberal' system that is challenged on every front and in all its attendant spheres including the political, economic and social.

While the youth spearheaded and initiated the popular movement, they were immediately joined by the radical left and the middle class democrats, and significantly, the youth and the radical left shared three objectives: 1) the re-establishment of democracy (i.e., the end of the military regime); 2) the formulation of new socio-economic policy that is favorable towards the popular classes (constituting a rupture in the submission to the exigencies and demands of global liberalism); and 3) the formulation of independent international policies (effecting a rupture with subjugation to the exigencies of US hegemony and the deployment of its military to control the entire planet). They are transforming this democratic revolution into an anti-imperialist revolution. In contradistinction, the middle classes, as a whole, are mobilizing solely around the democratic objective without seriously jeopardizing or questioning the 'market' as it stands now or Egypt's international commitments and alignment.

Concurrently, the conference of all the movements has continued its work in pushing for demands for a new democracy with all manner of freedoms such as the right to organize and access to the media. Additionally, the conference will deliberate the concept of a new constitution so that the assembly elected will be a constitutional one, not a legislative one—even if the government makes its soft amendments to the existing constitution. It is still as yet, too early, to know how the new government will manage the situation, and the movement has not completed its project. Army leadership desires a solid transition with an election in which the Muslim Brotherhood would, naturally, be represented prominently. A gradual transition would be preferable in order to permit the new political and democratic parties to organize themselves in order to elaborate their programs and projects as well as to secure access to public opinion before the elections.

There is question as to whether or not the tremors experienced in Tunisia and Egypt are social revolts or whether they signal the embarkation on larger revolutionary processes. They may be considered social revolts that potentially bear within them that which might crystalize into alternatives that could be considered, in the long term, to be situated in a socialist perspective. This is the reason why the capitalist system—the capital of dominant monopolies in the global system--cannot tolerate the development of these movements. They will mobilize all possible means of destabilization such as economic and financial pressure and even resort to military threat. Depending on the circumstances, they will support either fascist- or fascistic alternatives or even the establishment of a military junta dictatorship. It is imperative to not take any statements of the US administration at face value and to realize that, in essence, Barak Obama is the equivalent of George W. Bush, albeit with a superficial difference in approach and language, but where both represent an underlying and immutable duplicity. While the US was historically a pro-regime ally of Mubarak, the diffuse and non-

committal positions of the Obama administration demonstrated that the only underlying consideration that applied in deliberations over whether or not to sacrifice Mubarak were onces of efficient utility. The US will never renounce safeguarding what is essential to its interests and which is embodied in the military and the police apparatuses. They can tolerate the reinforcement of these by forging an alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood, and it appears that what US leaders have in mind for Egypt may very well be something along the lines of the Pakistani model, which is not a democratic system but an amalgam between a power that can ostensibly be termed Islamic and a military dictatorship. What is different in Egypt is that a large segment of the popular forces who mobilized in the uprisings are perfectly aware of these aims. The Egyptian people are very politicized, and the history of the country is of one of a nation that has been struggling to emerge since the beginning of the 19th century; where it has faltered was due, to an extent, to internal insufficiencies but primarily due to repeated external aggression and machinations.

During the period of Gamal Abd al-Nasser, Egypt had in place an economic and social system that can be criticized but which was coherent, nonetheless. Nasser was betting on industrialization in order to permit Egypt to escape the international colonial straight jacket that had pigeonholed the country and restricted it solely to the export of raw cotton. His system was capable of ensuring a just distribution of revenue in favor of the middle classes but without impoverishing the popular classes. However, the situation changed after the military hostilities of 1956—Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal which mobilized the Anglo-French Israeli tri-partite attack--and the 1967 War. Sadat and Mubarak, to an even greater extent after him, strove to dismantle the system of production, and they substituted an entirely incoherent one that was founded exclusively on the premise of making greater and greater profit. The alleged and supposed high levels of development and growth in Egypt that have been overinflated by the World Bank for thirty years now, are of no significance and merely 'eyewash'. Egypt's growth is extremely vulnerable, and it depends on the external market and the influx of oil capital flooding in from the rentier states of the Arab Gulf. With the global financial crisis, this vulnerability manifested in a brutal recession. The escalation of this crisis, was accompanied by an incredible increase in injustices, income gap and unemployment, which impacted primarily the youth. This volatile situation finally exploded. The process being witnessed now—in addition to initial demands for the departure of the *ancien* regime and the restoration of democratic liberties is a political battle.

The impact of the uprisings on the solidarity of Arab countries is not a simple matter to assess. Certainly, the echoes of what has transpired are still reverberating, but each country is distinct. Tunisia, for instance, is a small country with a comparatively higher standard of education and living than others, yet at the same time it is susceptible and vulnerable to the global economy. The precise nature of the impact on Palestine and Syria is complicated to assess and impact on Iraq is problematic to ascertain. South Yemen is essentially nationalist/populist with Marxist rhetoric and a measure of some thinking of the radical left, but with strong sentiment for a unified nation. Yemen is similar to Korea—with an underdeveloped north and an advanced south, and the country may split again because the south cannot accept unity.