

Dear Samir,

The paragraphs in red are added after the Zagreb interviews. Please take a look, and in particular see if the names or data in blue are correct. Please also feel free to make any revisions. I will also shorten some of Wen's parts.

This paper will be for the journal *Boundary 2*, so we will not send the English version to other newspapers or put on the website, until after it is published in *Boundary 2*. However, we can have the Chinese translation of this interview published in a journal in China.

Thank you very much!

Kin Chi

**The movement in Egypt
-- A dialogue with Samir Amin**

Wang Hui, Wen Tiejun, Lau Kin Chi

The World Social Forum was convened on Feb 6-11, 2011 at Dakar, Senegal. This coincided with the climax of the socio-political movement in Egypt confronting the Mubarak dictatorship. We conducted a series of discussions in Dakar, and later by phone and by a further interview on May 16-20 in Zagreb, Croatia, with Professor Samir Amin, renowned theorist and activist born in Egypt.

Samir Amin: one of the most important theorists of the dependency theory and long time activist in third world social movements. Founder and President of the Third World Forum (TWF) and the World Forum for Alternatives (WFA).

Wang Hui: Professor of the Faculty of Humanities, and Director of the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, Tsinghua University, Beijing.

Wen Tiejun: Dean of School of Agronomics and Rural Development, and Executive Director of the Advanced Institute on Sustainability, Renmin University of China, Beijing.

Lau Kin Chi: Associate Professor of Department of Cultural Studies, Lingnan

University, Hong Kong; Vice-president of World Forum for Alternatives (WFA), and Co-chair of Asian Regional Exchange for New Alternatives (ARENA).

Egyptian revolution is not colour revolution

Wang Hui: We are all very concerned with what is happening in Egypt. The mainstream mass media in many countries parallel what is happening in Tunisia and Egypt to the colour revolutions in Central Asia two decades ago. Such a parallel confuses some significant differences between the two. My intuition is that the revolution unfolding in Egypt is different from the colour revolutions that were pro-West and pro-capitalism, taking place after the disintegration of the USSR. The current massive democratic movement inevitably embeds a protest against the global hegemony of the USA.

Samir Amin: Egypt is a cornerstone in the US plan of control of the planet. Washington will not tolerate any attempt of Egypt to move out of its total submission. This is the exclusive target of Washington in its involvement in the organization of a “soft transition”. The plan of the ruling system is to make minimal concessions in order to safeguard the *essentials* of the system: that is, neoliberal capitalist integration into the global system, which is at the root of all these social devastations, and simultaneously a system aligned with US policy on the world and the region, which means also de facto allowing Israel to continue the devastation in occupied Palestine. This is what Obama means by "smooth transition" -- the transition which would lead to *no* change in fact, except some minor concessions such as the removal of Mubarak and his close associates.

What happened on February 12 was that firstly, Mubarak had not resigned; he was removed by a coup d’etat of the head of the army, and he and his fellow vice president Omar Suleiman were dismissed. The new official leadership of the army claimed that it would hold power until new elections, and then the army would go back to the barracks. In the meantime, they would be responsible for the transition.

Lau Kin Chi: The military maneuvered to take power, and you pointed out this was a coup d’etat. It seems the euphoria of the overthrow of Mubarak overshadowed this fact. Not unexpectedly, the army would want restoration of order and containment of the mass mobilizations. Right after Mubarak was removed, the army cleared the Tahrir Square, arrested protestors that refused to leave the Square, kept the martial

law in place, and endeavoured to present an image of return to “normalcy”. A period of uncertainty and a tag of war have unfolded. On the one hand, the people have continued with their assemblies in the street, advancing the revolution. Every Friday, we have witnessed huge mobilizations. At the same time, for sure, the reactionary forces are trying all means to turn the tide of the people’s revolution, and they never lack the means of power and violence to do so. For them, it is crucial to break the defiance and confidence that is newly acquired by the masses. We are interested in understanding the balance of forces and the state of organization of the masses.

Samir Amin: I would first discuss the components and the strategies of the movement.

There are four components of the opposition. One is the youth. They are politicized young people, more than one million organized, which is not at all a small number. They are against the social and economic system. Whether they are anti-capitalist is a little theoretical for them, but they are against social injustice and growing inequality. They are nationalist in the good sense, they are anti-imperialist. They hate the submission of Egypt to the US hegemony. They are therefore against so-called peace with Israel, which tolerates Israel’s continued colonization of occupied Palestine. They are democratic, totally against the dictatorship of the army and the police. They have decentralized leaderships. When they first gave the order to demonstrate, the mobilization was one million. But within a few hours, the actual figure was not one million, but fifteen millions, everywhere throughout the whole nation, and in the quarters of small towns and villages. They had an immediate gigantic positive echo in the whole nation. The effect was that fear switched sides.

The second component is the radical left, which comes from the communist tradition. The young are not anti communist, but they do not want to be put in the frame of a party with chiefs and orders. They do not have bad relations with the communists. Absolutely no problem. Thanks to the demonstrations, there is a coming together, not of leadership, but of interaction.

Wang Hui: This means that no matter whether it is the youth movement or the communists, their critique of the present regime and their demand for democracy involve not only resistance against US hegemony, but also critique of the current social, political and economic system. While the traditional left and the youth movement share some similarities in orientation, they differ with regard to the form of the movement. The contemporary movement does not wish to be constrained in the framework of highly organized institutions such as political parties. This is manifested in the rejection of the movement to be represented by various organizations. What does El Baradei represent?

Samir Amin: He represents the third component, which is the middle class democrats. The system is so police and so mafia that many, including small businessmen, are continuously racketed in order to survive. They are not part of the left; they accept capitalism, business and the market, they are even not totally anti-American, they do not love Israel but they accept it. But they are democrats, against the concentration of power of the army, police and the gang mafia around. El Baradei is typical of them, he has no idea of the economy other than what it is -- the market. He does not know what socialism is, but he is democrat. He is more known outside than in Egypt, but could correct that quickly. It is not impossible that he would be a partner in the transition. Yet the Army and the Intelligence will not abandon their dominant position in the ruling of the society. Will El Baradei accept it?

Wang Hui: El Baradei goes for what we normally call “political democracy”, but he has no idea what such political democracy corresponds to in terms of social form because he fundamentally accepts the existing capitalist system. On the eve of the Iraq War, on the issue of investigation into weapons of mass destruction, he had had some tensions with the USA, but he does not harbour alternatives. How about the Muslim Brotherhood? The western media pay much attention to it.

Samir Amin: The fourth component is the Muslim Brotherhood. Even if they have a public political popular echo, they are ultra reactionary. They have not only religious ideology, they are reactionaries on the social ground. They have been openly against the strikes of the workers, standing with the state. They think workers should accept the market. They took a position against the peasants’ movement. There is a strong middle peasant movement, they are menaced by the market, by the rich peasants, they struggle for the right to maintain their property. The Muslim Brotherhood took a position against them, saying that land property is a private right, and market is sacrosanct in Koran.

The complicity of the Muslim Brotherhood with the regime

The Muslim Brotherhood has been in fact complicit with the regime. The regime and the Muslim Brotherhood are in apparent conflict, but in fact they are combined. The State has given up to the Muslim Brotherhood three major institutions: education, justice, and state TV; these are very important state institutions. Through education, they have imposed the veil first for the girls in school and then for society. Through justice, they introduce the Islam law shari’a. Through the media, they influence public

opinion. The leadership has always been a corrupted political leadership made up of very rich people. They have always been financed by Saudi Arabia, which means by the USA. But they have two big influences, one in the sectors of the middle class which are pro-capitalist, anti-communist, afraid of the people, and they think Muslim rule is not a bad thing. These are spontaneously with them. They are very influential among teachers, medical doctors, and lawyers etc. At the same time, they have a lumpen support in which they recruit their paid militias. In Egypt, extreme poverty is large scale. We have 5 million in Cairo that are totally deprived among a population of 15 million. Among the very poor with very low political understanding, the Muslim Brotherhood has this army that they can mobilize. In case of “success” and “elections”, the Muslim Brotherhood will become the major parliamentary force. The USA welcomes this and has qualified the Muslim Brotherhood as being “moderate”, that is docile, accepting submission to US strategy, leaving Israel free to continue its occupation of Palestine. The Muslim Brotherhood is also fully in favour of the ongoing “market” system, totally externally dependent. They are also, in fact, partners in the “comprador” ruling class. The top leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood is made up entirely of billionaires.

Wang Hui: The Muslim Brotherhood represents a religious political force. According to your analysis, such a religious political force does not provide alternatives for the social or economic system. On the contrary, there is no contradiction between the politicization of religion and the consolidation of the market system. The four elements you mentioned above have different inclinations, characteristics and backgrounds, but how did they come together?

Samir Amin: What happens is the following. The movement was started by the youth, joined immediately by the radical left, and joined the next day by the bourgeois democrats. The Muslim Brotherhood boycotted for the first four days because they thought the movement would be defeated by the police. When they saw that the movement could not be defeated, the leadership thought they could not stay out, and they moved in. This fact must be known.

Wang Hui: You said that the US strategy for Egypt very much resembles the US strategy for Pakistan, which is the combination of political Islam and military intelligence. We can also add the globalized capitalist market system. Can such a system support democracy?

Samir Amin: The system is not Mubarak, but the people in protest started with one

symbol, which is Mubarak. A few hours after Mubarak nominated Omar Suleiman as vice president, the slogan shouted by the people was: “No Mubarak, no Suleiman, they are two Americans.” Obama wants a soft transition, which would be something like in the Philippines. The people say, we want to get rid of not one criminal but all criminals, a real transition not a farce, so there is a very high political consciousness. Yet the US target is a soft transition. How? By opening negotiation with the right and the centre, with the Muslim Brotherhood and eventually some bourgeois democrats, they would isolate the left and the youth. That is their strategy.

The system is very vicious. It had opened the prison and released 17,000 criminals during the Tahrir Square demonstrations, given them pro-Mubarak badges, arms, money, and the guarantee that they would not return to the prison, for them to attack the demonstrators. These criminals could not have escaped from the prison if not with the protection of the police. Nobody from the movement opened the prison.

It is the beginning of a long struggle. Egypt is a country of long revolutions. From 1920 to 1952, with ups and downs. In the long run, the youth and the left are the majority, with capacity for action. But a bad scenario is the possibility of the Muslim Brotherhood attacking them. They have tried.

Lau Kin Chi: In the mainstream media, the status of the Muslim Brotherhood is dubious. It is sometimes portrayed as a threat to the system, being Islam, but sometimes it is portrayed as a victim of the system under Mubarak.

Samir Amin: The army is part of the system, and the Muslim Brotherhood is also part of the system. They have been associated since the time of Sadat and Mubarak. They continue to be associated. They appear to be dissociated because they have different constituencies, hence they need to look separate. The strategy of the USA is to maintain the system, with minimal concession to democracy. Their example could be like the Philippines or Indonesia, you have change of the leader, but not the system. Later, there will be a government with the Muslim Brotherhood and the army. The army has been corrupted, the enormous US aid to Egypt was not to reinforce the military capacity of the army at all, but to allow the army to buy off with this money 40% of the Egyptian economy. That is purposely done, in order to capture the army as ally of the US. This must be taken into account.

The challenge is in front of us. We had a first victory, which is of course very important. But there would be the role of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood is not a democratic organization, and cannot be so. It is a top down military organization with the least democracy. It is a quasi fascist party, and it has different constituencies. **The fact that the Muslim Brotherhood has a hierarchy and a**

popular audience is something different. Not that you have a popular audience and you are progressive. You have reactionary parties that have a popular audience. That should be very clear. The leaders are multi billionaires funded by Saudi Arabia. The cadres are backward segments of the petty bourgeoisie, mostly religious. The masses are poor chaps, recruited through social activities financed by Saudi Arabia. The militias are lumpen. We should insist on the duplicity of the USA in preparing for the role of the Muslim Brotherhood. The support by US and Europe to political Islam is total and absolute, and their fear of Muslim Brotherhood is only a lie, for internal European consumption. Muslim Brotherhood is the only strong ally they have to prevent democracy. My first sentence is “the west is anti-democracy”. They do not want democracy, because they know democracy in such countries in the south is bound to be anti-imperialist, and potentially anti-capitalist.

Lau Kin Chi: The danger of the Muslim Brotherhood taking prominence in the new social order is not only economic and political, but also social and cultural. When the USA presents itself as distanced from the Muslim Brotherhood for its Islam fundamentalism, it gives lip service to the universalism of liberty and equality. I think the duplicity of the USA in “aiding” the restoration of “order” in Egypt against the revolutionary potentials in breaking the domination of the status quo in the social and cultural life of the people that power the upsurge of the masses with their renewed insistence on justice and liberation would be a tacit tolerance for the Muslim Brotherhood to take offensives on the social and religious fronts. Religious minorities as well as women would be the first to take the toll. This cultural front is a major challenge to the democratic forces. During the Tahrir Square demonstrations, there were reports of a conscious effort by demonstrators to refuse divisions, that there were many slogans about solidarity between Copts and Muslims, that the Copts took guard while the Muslims were praying. Deep politics is not institutional democracy and rights, but values and behaviour in the everyday practice of relating to each other. I am concerned how the Muslim Brotherhood will consolidate its reactionary politics through sowing divisions which have been culturally latent in society. The way the USA has supported Pakistan with its political Islam and its conservative cultural politics gives us a glimpse into how the USA may relate to the Muslim Brotherhood. In this regard, the defense of the rights of women against the reactionary politics of the Muslim Brotherhood is paramount to the politics of the youth and the communists.

Samir Amin: You are absolutely right. And it is of first importance to denounce the duplicity of the discourse of Obama and the West on “democracy”. In fact the plan of Obama for Egypt, supported by the Gulf countries and the reactionary bloc, which

includes the Muslim Brotherhood, is precisely not to allow any democracy in Egypt. This would be too dangerous for their interests. They want Egypt remain submissive to the pattern of neo-liberal globalization and to the US-Israeli military control over the region.

The most active forces in the movement, the majority of the youth, are aware of that danger. They have no sympathy with the actions against the Copts and the women conducted by so-called “Muslim movements”. But the western media are silent on those issues. They do not want to disturb the plan of Obama! And they continue delivering a “certificate of democracy” to the Muslim Brotherhood, which is the most radical anti-democratic political force since its creation in 1927!

Beyond the street politics

Lau Kin Chi: The way the media operates is to privilege what is visible. If there are huge gatherings in the Tahrir Square, something is happening. Otherwise, it is the mundane daily routines. The challenge for us is to see beyond the street politics. What I have found very inspiring in the Egyptian upsurge is how the spirit of hope and defiance became contagious. There must have been a lot of fear and uncertainty in the face of possible repression, and each person or community had to deal with the fear and uncertainty personally as well as mutually. This is where the new politics comes in. When the people came out to say “enough is enough”, they overcame fear because they could see hope beyond the impending repression that could bring death, torture and “defeat”. A Chinese saying goes: when the people do not fear death, how can fear be induced by the threat of death? The instruments for spreading hope against fear include constant exchange, facilitated by physical mass gatherings at the Tahrir Square and open spaces throughout the country, and also by the internet, through facebook, twitter, blogs... Many people talk about such use of new instruments of linking and organizing, seeing them as different from movement organization and activism in conventional partisan or syndicalist forms of the 19th and 20th centuries. However, I feel we should not be counterposing one form of organization against another. It need not be an either-or choice because various forms of connecting can carry the potential of entering into ongoing processes of the constitution of the subject of hope, the subject of revolutionary uprising that is larger than the privatized self of individuals in isolation. Can you tell us more about the strategic and tactical moves by some forces of the revolution at this critical juncture to connect and consolidate?

Samir Amin: The movement is the majority of the people, there are millions and millions. They are fully aware of the problems. Every Friday there have been gigantic

mobilizations, each time with more political maturity. They say, we do not want a government aligned with the USA. They will continue demonstrating and mobilizing. They will use the margin of freedom of speech now allowed to raise the political awareness of the people. On May 13, we had 300,000 demonstrate against the atrocities against the Christians. People know how dangerous this can be. There were two sets of demonstrations, one was Copts and Muslims protesting together for national unity (you know, the flag of the 1920 revolution was with the cross and the crescent). The other demonstration on May 13 was the movement to go to the border of Palestine. In Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, people went to the border of Israel. It was a demonstration which shows one important thing. Contrary to what the mainstream media say, it is not pro-west demonstration but anti-imperialist demonstration. The demands were anti imperialist and social, not socialist. No privatization, Re-nationalizations. USA out, USA agreement with Egypt, out. For schools and hospitals, labour, etc. You do not see one single Islamic flag.

Lau Kin Chi: But we also hear of reports of many clashes between Muslims and Copts in the mainstream media.

Samir Amin: There are conflicts provoked by small fascist groups of the Muslim Brotherhood, because the state and the police have not changed. The demonstrations for solidarity are many, but not reported in the mainstream media. The presentation of a clash between the people is false. There are organized attacks on the Copts by the state and police, with the support of the Muslim Brotherhood, who disguise themselves behind the salafi movement, the most extremist, which is protected by Saudi Arabia. They are in conflict with Egyptian Islam, with the sufis who are the majority. It is very complicated. Of course, the Egyptian power has always been able to manipulate this.

Lau Kin Chi: How were the Popular Committees formed at the Tahrir Square? There is very little report about them in the mainstream mass media.

Samir Amin: Initially, there was nothing reported in the western media purposely. The western media want to pretend that people are happy with the transition. The people have applauded the fall of Mubarak. On the other hand, the people of the Popular Committees are too busy. They are well known inside Egypt, though not outside. How did they operate? They sat together for hours and hours to discuss how to proceed. It started very early, around the second or third day of the demonstration. It started not spontaneously, but at Tahrir Square, with a good number of representatives of the

three components of the movement. Then they felt there should be similar Popular Committees at different levels.

The agenda has changed. Initially, it was the removal of Mubarak, and establishing the rules for a real transition:

First, the immediate dissolution of the fabricated assembly;

Second, the immediate lifting of the martial law and allowing free demonstration;

Third, starting the project of a new constitution;

Fourth, the assembly elected should be a constitutional assembly;

Fifth, not immediate or fast elections, but allow for a long time of freedom. If it is immediate elections, many people will vote for the Muslim Brotherhood because they are organized, they have the media, and so on. But if you allow for a year of real freedom, the left and the youth can then organize themselves.

Now, the agenda is what we want in transition and as final target. First, the economic and social system should deliver for the popular classes. They say to the World Bank and IMF literally, go to hell! Second, independent foreign policy of Egypt, not be tied to the USA and Israel. Third, a transitional government that includes them. The current focus is on the transition government.

Lau Kin Chi: What is the scale of the Popular Committees?

Samir Amin: During the first days, there was no name to these gatherings. Now they have organized, and are called Popular Committees. There are about 500 in Egypt, practically covering the whole country. In Cairo, there are many, but there is no central one. Those that are relatively popular in lower and middle class places are very lively. This does not prevent intellectuals or bourgeois democrats not living there to go there. I assume in small cities it might be very local, but I do not know. The youths, communists, trade unions, peasants, bourgeois democrats, are all part of it. There are Muslim Brotherhood people but they are there not as Muslim Brotherhood. What is important is that Popular Committees are not delegates or representatives of organizations. People know you are a leader of a certain trade union, or a leader of the communist party. It is not a representative organization, it is not elected. The forces which are active want to be there, and they are there. It was quite informal for a few months.

Lau Kin Chi: In Popular Committees, do people discuss anything and everything?

Samir Amin: Yes, as you say, anything and everything. They discuss problems faced

by the people: labour conditions, social and economic conditions, school and health, and also the constitution.

Lau Kin Chi: Are Popular Committees more a platform of discussion, interaction, or are they followed up by some forms of organization?

Samir Amin: They capture whatever they can capture and reflect these in their own organizations. It depends on whether the communists or the trade unions take the different views into account. Everybody is organized, not that they are unorganized, but they are not a strait-jacket organization.

Lau Kin Chi: Do they form any federation? Or move away from traditional conventional forms of organization that are not top down, or based on representation? Are you saying these are convergences for exchanges, and there is no formal membership?

Samir Amin: Nobody is excluded, but until now, the attendance is high.

Lau Kin Chi: Usually how many in Cairo?

Samir Amin: It depends. In Cairo, the building of the Syndicate of Journalists is huge, Stalino type, with meeting rooms for two to three thousand people on each floor, with 10 floors; the over 200 rooms are continuously full house. The building is permanently occupied by the people. The army want to appear as neutral, though they are not. They have not associated with repression. No clash with the people. Hence no reoccupation of the building. Depending on the hours, on the type of meetings, it might be 50 people in a room of 3000, but after a few hours, 2,000 people. Unpredictable, but it is a continuous debate. When I was there, I went there almost everyday, you go and discuss, and that is all. It is not unorganized, you can say it is organized, it is a state in between. That is why we want to make the transition a long one, independently of the elections. The movement cannot stop to wait for the elections or for the government to deal with all the problems that are there. We hope they will crystallize into organizations, formal alliances, or more explicitly organized forms. Until early May, everything was more implicit than explicit. People know what they agree and disagree on.

The Popular Committees, during the May 13 week, formed a National Council which would be around 150 people. They have not all been selected. Not selected by the top. It brings together a dozen political parties, all those who claim to be socialist,

communist, democratic. Excluding the Muslim Brotherhood as a non-democratic party, and excluding the former bourgeois parties that supported Mubarak. But it includes all other parties that have been established and claim to be democratic. All the independent trade unions immediately responded yes, we will participate. Also the independent peasant organization Small Peasants for Resistance Against Expropriation; they are not unified at the national level, but exist at the provincial level. And organizations of the youth, which are in a very primitive state, in the sense that they are networks, with names and are known, of thousands and tens of thousands of people, but with no leadership. They are free to organize themselves as they want. There is no imposed leadership. The National Council has declared that it will devote time to elaborate a proposed constitution, and eventually, if we are victorious, to submit it to referendum, and then have election of parliament. Not a presidential system, but a parliamentary one, with a prime minister. This way, it is more representative than a quickly elected parliament.

In addition, instead of the present pattern of transition, it proposes a presidential committee with 5 persons, one from the army (we do not want to deny them any role), the four others coming from this National Council, perhaps with one Muslim who is democratic.

Lau Kin Chi: No Muslim Brotherhood?

Samir Amin: No. The presidential committee can run the country in a long transition. The fact that the Muslim Brotherhood is excluded is not because it is Islamic, as there are other Islamic movements in the Council. It is only because the Muslim Brotherhood has taken a position against the movement, so they are not a part of the movement. Why the Mubarak party is excluded, because it has taken a position against the movement. Muslim Brotherhood supported them, so it is not a part of the movement, though Muslim Brotherhood is part of the Egyptian reality. This Council is a Council of the movement, and this is a very good step forward.

Lau Kin Chi: Was this quite unexpected?

Samir Amin: No, I was hoping for this development. But I was afraid of some mistakes. I was afraid people would be jealous, why this person and not that person. I was always careful about this. There are always competitions, including of personalities. Some people have big ambitions, want to be president, head of the academy, of the government, ministers, there are plenty of people like that. That is normal, including among the communists. We assume they are good activists, but they

are also human beings. But we hope to overcome this.

Lau Kin Chi: is El Bardadei in this?

Samir Amin: El Baradei has taken a position from the first day with the movement, so he is in. It is not an assembly of the socialists or the communists, it is an assembly of the movement. In the National Council, there are Nasserians, Baradeis. The criterion is if you take the position with the movement, we do not ask you what are your ideologies and targets. If you were against the movement, we do not see why you have a place.

Lau Kin Chi: The Muslim Brotherhood does not want to be part of this?

Samir Amin: No, they want to make an Islamic front.

Lau Kin Chi: So they want an Islamic front against the democratic front. While there is this broad democratic front, there is also a proliferation of political parties. You have played a role in the formation of the Socialist Party.

Samir Amin: It is one of the communist parties. My personal view is that we should not try to have only one party. People should associate as they feel like. I would be a member of many parties, all the parties that are radical left, with more or less communist and Marxist tradition. I do not see any harm of being member of 2 or 3 parties.

We should not try to have one party only, otherwise there will be a lot of personal struggles. The parties can have small different opinions that are not fundamental. Let the people meet and organize and have their closest sympathies. This does not prevent various parties to work together in alliance. It is not necessary to move to the tradition of the Third International, or to THE party, and what is not THE party is the enemy. The youth would not accept it. They are close to and spontaneously sympathize with the communists, but they would not want to be members of communist parties. And they are right. I feel that now, when we call ourselves communist, we are respected. But some people feel the name would frighten others, so we are called Socialist Party.

We should not introduce the problems of the parties into the movements. Otherwise there would be endless internal debates on history. I was with the Maoists. Others were mostly Stalinist. Some others were semi anarchist, semi Trotskyist. We have all these currents in the new Socialist Party.

Lau Kin Chi: Apart from your Socialist Party, there are also several parties that are socialist or communist. How do you relate to one another?

Samir Amin: I am a member of the Socialist Party, but I am not an enemy of the others. I do not see necessary differences of quality of militancy between our members and their members. I do not consider the others as traitors or deviations. The Socialist Party is not a new one, because many of us are old communists from the Egyptian Communist Party, but we want to go beyond the polemics of whether you are Stalinist, Maoist or what.

Lau Kin Chi: So this is a regrouping.

Samir Amin: We do not take people away from the other parties. We do not open polemics among ourselves. In April 2011, five parties have come together to establish an Alliance of the Socialist Forces. The Communist Party is a faction of the former Tagammu Party, the united party of the communists and the Nasserians; they are in my opinion very good comrades but they are nostalgic of old communism; there is no reason to exclude them and insult them as old Stalinists. The Popular Democratic Alliance is the majority faction of the former Tagammu Party. The Democratic Labour Party, if I were to use the old language, which I do not want, is anarcho-syndicalist, and they are communist in ideology, giving a specific importance to working among the working class; they are probably de facto the closest to the trade unions. And the Revolutionary Socialist Party, the former Trotskyists.

Lau Kin Chi: How influential and how numerous are the five communist parties?

SA: Brought together they may be 10,000 people. Their social and ideological influence in the country is far than their number. You find here all the productive intellectuals, all the de facto leaders of trade unions and organizations. They are able to make a speech or write a paper with an influence. The best journalists, the best of almost everything.

Lau Kin Chi: what distinguishes your party from other four communist parties, in terms of programme or component?

Samir Amin: The programmes are similar, and they come out of the movement. As to what they imagine to be "socialism", then you have the widest curiosity. For some people, the Soviet, Stalinist model was socialist. Socialism for them is state

nationalization and planning. Full stop.

Lau Kin Chi: And democracy is not included in this?

Samir Amin: They are not terribly democratic people. This is associated with a very strong nationalism, in the positive way, for national independence and south-south alliance, non-aligned. Democracy is not their problem. They do not see why the youth are not attracted by them.

I know many of the old guards of the left. One was put to jail by Sadat in 1971. We are in the same party, he asked why I did not go to visit him when he was head of the police during the Nasserian time. I asked him, do you remember you were the head of police who ordered my arrest? And he said, ah yes!

The current alliance of the communist parties should not be an alliance of the top. Their members should meet to decide together common actions, and eventually to jointly sign pamphlets. We do not compel people to be members of one party.

Lau Kin Chi: Are some people members of more than one party?

Samir Amin: It depends on the rules of each party.

Lau Kin Chi: It is important to have parties, for one cannot avoid the question of political positions and political programmes. But parties existing for elections are competitive with each other for voters, and are constrained by electoral politics. From the experience of the Egyptian movement, do you see new elements or old legacies? Are there innovative forms of organization? In the latest developments of the alliance of the left, or the National Council, are there ways of organizing that avoid anarchism but not go back to old ways?

Samir Amin: It is not possible to answer your question. Let us be modest. It is no more the concept of the Third International, or trade unions etc led by the party. If we try to have one party, like the Third International pattern, that there is only one good party, and all others are enemies, we would be lost. We do not want to go into all these debates. One front, but not one party. Plural parties, but not one party. They do not necessarily agree on everything, but have common ground on the socialist perspective, anti-imperialist, independent, and benefit for the popular working class. They might have differences in strategy, or different vision in the longer run of the connection between democratization of society and socialization of the economy. We leave these matters of disagreement open to discussion, but this must not prevent us from

agreeing on a minimum programme, and also on day-to-day action. We also include in the front independent organizations, trade unions and youth organizations. In this perspective, this is innovative. In the Popular Committees, people represent different political forces and organizations, trade unions, syndicates of doctors, journalists. A front of all these people. To bring all into one party would be a disaster. Even the bourgeoisie now understand that they will not have only one party, but several, all called democratic, popular (laugh), with billionaires and bankers.

Will it succeed or fail, can it promote effective, strong action, unite and not divide the people, or will it fall into anarchism and polemics? Many people are aware of the dangers and try to avoid them, but I cannot swear that this will not occur.

Lau Kin Chi: Samir, you have an openness in looking at the party! How does that come about, the way you relate to the left?

Samir Amin: That is a long story of my struggle in the party. I am not alone, but I am in the minority. The majority of the activists are party-minded. They do not look at the party as a historical form of organization. I am not against organization, because I do not think that things will happen by themselves. But from time to time and from situation to situation, they change, there is not one good forever. The second and the third internationals are ideology of the supreme form, THE party, and only one good one. History has proven that there is no one good party. I said Tito's Communist Party was not the worst party in Yugoslavia, but yet in the end it turned to be stupid. It happens. Parties are part of the history of society, they change, they can change for better or for worse, they appear in different forms. It should not be sacrosanct.

It is like the church, the good religion, and the church representing the good religion which is supposed to be forever. I think it is a non Marxist vision of organization. What I call historical Marxism is Marxism as understood by people who call themselves Marxist. People who call themselves Marxist are only part of history. It does not mean we have an alternative blueprint. At least in the visible future, it will be an alliance of organizations.

We can get the support of the majority in our society on the following three demands that cannot be dissociated:

1. Democratization and secularization of society with women's rights etc. not only multi party elections;
- 2, progressive, social transformation, not necessarily socialist; and
- 3, anti-imperialism and land question. On these issues they can converge.

The objective conditions in Europe are different from ours. On these three issues,

we can get the majority in terms of the popular classes and the middle class.

But in Europe and USA, it is not so, because the society benefit from the imperialist rent. The imperialist rent is not just super profit for monopolies. It has a social influence. The reproduction of society as it is needs imperialist rent. Therefore there is a kind of complicity. It is not by pure chance that all the revolutions of the 20th century, Russia, China, Vietnam, Cuba, and now, Nepal, Latin America, the wave against neo-liberalism is in the emergent countries, but nothing important is happening in Europe.

Lau Kin Chi: We have on the one end, political parties with hierarchy and organization, and on the other hand, anarchic, horizontal democracy. Where is the National Council?

Samir Amin: Both are there.

Lau Kin Chi: Is it one party one vote?

Samir Amin: For example, the Egyptian Socialist Party has 5 members, and 5-6 parties have 30-40 members. The number is around 150, it may be increased. An organization can come and say, we have been with the movement, then it is welcome. Then the people will see how to have a balance of representation in the Council, it is not a majority of socialist or communist, not a majority of the young, not a majority of the bourgeois democrat...

Lau Kin Chi: How to manage this in reality? It would take a lot of mutual respect, and putting the need of the movement in priority.

Samir Amin: Yes, through the movement, people have learnt to have mutual respect. Even the people who did not give much importance to politics were struggling together, hiding from the police, fighting, mobilizing, sending out pamphlets. There is mutual respect, and not consensus.

Lau Kin Chi: we have all these historical experiences that in times of hardship, people have solidarity, genuine sentiments of solidarity. But with power and fame...

Samir Amin: Absolutely, there is no guarantee.

Lau Kin Chi: How is the National Council, from the very beginning, be conceived and

formed by taking certain precautions or channeling towards certain directions?

Samir Amin: I do not know, it is too early to say, it has just started. The Popular Committees have continued to push for their demands for a new democracy with all freedoms such as organization and access to the media. They will deliberate on a concept of new constitution, so that the assembly that will be elected will be a constitutional assembly, not a legislative assembly, even if the government makes its soft amendments to the present constitution.

It is too early to know how this new government will manage the condition. The movement has not completed its project. The leadership of the army wants a strong transition with an election in which of course the Muslim Brotherhood will be highly represented. We want a slow transition in order to allow for the new political, democratic forces to organize themselves, to elaborate their programmes and projects, and to have access to the public opinion, before the elections.

Wang Hui: Maybe this is the key to whether this movement can become a truly revolutionary movement. The broad social movement can only form its programme and leadership through the form of the popular committees, and take part in the process of redrafting the constitution. The current formal democracy is likely to facilitate the domination of the parliament and the power centre by organizations already existing during the former regime, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, or personalities from the military. In fact, the Mubarak regime also had some form of democracy, but its parliamentary representation and its electoral system were not representative, and were autocratic political forms. Whether a genuine civil government can form through mass democracy is key to the political trend of Egyptian politics. This is a real challenge to today's youth movement, workers movement and progressive organizations in Egypt.

One of the slogans of the social movement is to set up a civil government, which means this should neither be a military government nor a religious government. Which is the true meaning of the word "civil". Tactically, the movement requires a certain period for preparation, so that on the basis of broad mobilization and participation, the agenda and the representatives can be generated for their direct intervention into the political process after the massive movement. Mubarak's police dictatorship has deprived Egyptian society of political spaces. Apart from the underground communist party and the Muslim Brotherhood, society is in a state of de-politicization.

The current task is for re-politicization, and society is in the process of re-politicization. De-politicization is both the cause for the Mubarak regime to

collapse, and also the dilemma facing the social movements today. If the soft transition tactic is partially successful, that is, Mubarak's fall is supported by the military and the police, then the most important challenge for the mass movement will be whether it can sustain and form clearer objectives. You think the youths are supportive of the left, but the right and the Muslim Brotherhood would also attempt to sow differentiation among the youth. What is most important is that the youth and the democrats are not pro-USA.

Lau Kin Chi: The youth is represented in two ways – going to the street, or going on to the internet. There may be some mystification of the internet as a form of autonomous communication and association, in lieu of and opposed to conventional forms of association and organization. Surely, the internet was much used for spreading ideas and information. But how do the “youth” keep up the lively debates and organization? The mainstream media also want to portray things returning to normality, the youth being enthusiastic only for a short span, and the internet form of activeness as ad hoc. My intuition is that there is a deep politicization process going on, which may be compared to the wave of radicalization of the 1960s. They may not result in direct outcomes, but the impact is profound.

Samir Amin: Absolutely. I think there are 2, 3, 4 million people in Egypt who are daily and continuously active. They have opinions, and express them. People make analogies like Berlin Wall, but this is nonsense. They are making analogies of societies totally out of context. It is ridiculous. IT is available as an instrument. We should be cautious. The youth is not a class and is not homogenous. The youth make networks for political reasons. An ordinary Egyptian does not know English. The 1 million bloggers in Egypt are people from the lower middle class, with education, but exclusively in Arabic. 70% is progressive, 30% is confused, but nothing is really reactionary. The 5% who write in English and are the most known outside are reactionary. They are Americanized, brainwashed completely, they speak and write English, they hardly write good Arabic. In some cases, they are laughable. I was at a wedding in Egypt of a son of an Egyptian billionaire, and they speak exclusively English among themselves. There was a band that played popular music, and only then did they discover there is local music, and was told this was authentic Egyptian music. There is a small population of upper middle and very rich people who are completely Americanized, and have nothing to do with the country. The new generation of professionals are children of very rich landlords. They are totally foreigners in their own country. They are of course pro-USA, pro neo-liberalism. They are bourgeois democrats. Many reports are about them. If the other sectors go on

decline, they would come on to the front stage, like what happened in Eastern Europe.

Wang Hui: Can the democrats propose any objectives?

Samir Amin: Many democrats are neutral, not against the Americans. El Baradei is rather naïve that the Americans are for democracy. We continue repeating that the target of USA is not democracy.

Beyond parliamentary democracy

Wen Tiejun: Since the political system, with its values, of the developed countries is considered by the mainstream as universal, it is difficult for anyone to cast doubt on the problems of the formal political superstructure including multi-party parliamentary democracy, freedom of media, universal suffrage, etc. However, when people resort to this ideologized mainstream discourse of social sciences of the West, they deliberately ignore the fact that the modern superstructure corresponding to the global expansion of capital lack the support of the economic infrastructure in developing countries, hence it has a counter-role to play in suppressing or constraining the economic infrastructure.

The superstructure is costly for developed countries; the more modernized the political system, the worse is the total debt of the country. This is chiefly due to the over-politicization of the middle class, as the majority of the population, in non-universal, vulgarized consumerism and welfarism. Hence, even if the so-called human rights, democracy and freedom promoted by politicians in the west have become accepted by marginalized groups in many developing countries due to the ideologized social science education and mass media, they do not have the objective supporting conditions in most countries. This causes a counter-effect by pro-West elite groups on the independent and autonomous development of developing countries.

Marginalized groups lacking their own discourse-formation capacity are followers of such beliefs. Yet, such a generalized and popularized global discourse is embarrassing because the demand for such modernized politics is not based on any calculation of whether the economic infrastructure can afford the huge costs.

I think the street politics in these countries lack clear organizational discipline or partisan programme. They are neither the traditional class struggle in the west in the 19th century, nor the nationalist politics of decolonization struggles in the developing countries in the 20th century. Their nature is social unrest incurred by the developing countries shouldering excessive costs of the global economic crisis due to their single-product economy. The fatigue of the people is long-term. The sudden eruption

is due to two immediate crises: high inflation, and high unemployment.

Samir Amin: Again I agree with your analysis. I have written papers on the limits and contradictions of “liberal democracy”, i.e., multiparty elections and full stop. This pattern of political management of the society does not disturb the control of monopoly capital. It comes to be “no democracy” for the majority. And therefore it delegitimises democracy, to the benefit of “religious” false alternatives. It only satisfies the appetites of consumerist middle classes.

But I remain less pessimistic than you seem to be. Many of the young generation understand that these problems are caused by the capitalist crisis, hence the movement carries with it the nature of resistance to capitalist globalization. It thus goes to the root of the problem. In the process of the mass democratic movement, the people push for genuine social and economic progress to resolve the crisis.

Wang Hui: There is a strong spontaneity in the movement in Egypt, with various forces suddenly joining in the torrential movement. This movement is distinct from mass movements of the 20th century wherein party politics is the mechanism for mobilization. It is also distinct from a pure class movement, even though the working class and the traditional left are also main participants in the movement. After the movement started, many political organizations and opportunists attempt to represent the movement to negotiate with the government, but the mass movement rejects their claim to representation.

Lau Kin Chi: The social contradictions have so accumulated that eruptions could be triggered off by any incident. What has happened after the suicidal burning of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia could not have been foreseen not only because the eruption of such a massive uprising seems to be so sudden and spontaneous that the necessary preliminary work of planning and building the movement seems to be absent. It is not foreseeable particularly because to our rational mind accustomed to calculative and measuring mentality, it is unimaginable that what we deem as passive agencies produced in an atomized society can become other than what they are – marginalized, excluded, divided and disparate elements, barely capable of meeting the needs of survival. This is not so much a question of having faith in the people than a question of the theoretical underpinning that makes it impossible to hold such a faith except as a blind faith. I believe it is important to think through how it is possible that a multiplicity of isolated individuals subject to intersecting fields of constraints and coercions can break away and transform themselves into revolutionary subjects as if in no time. I think this is important for a rethinking of alliance and solidarity with

regard not only to resistance, but also to building new forms of democratic units for practices outside the logic of capital. We have witnessed in this Egyptian uprising a multiplicity of actors, not organized and deployed as a disciplined army directed from a central military or party command, but can transform themselves in no time, taking their own decisions for action, not individually as such, but mutually affecting each other. The multiple sites of initiatives interacting with each other, rather than their “weakness” of lack of centrality, turn out to be their “strength” – the movement constitutes a continuously weaving and interweaving web, uncontainable by any ideological dogma, dynamic in its responsiveness to concrete situations.

Whether effective forms of linking and organizing are developed in the process of the mass mobilizations may not be visible to the mass media or the public, but what is certain is the politicization of millions in the process. Apart from conventional organizational forms of political parties such as the “25 January Party for Development and Renaissance” or the Socialist Party, we need to see how new movements such as the “April 6 Youth Movement” has a history going back to political engagement since the 2008 general strike. On the other hand, how the boosted morale and sense of dignity and confidence translate into forces for community organization and participation at local sites, for these constitute the long-term movement for profound cultural change.

Samir Amin: Yes again, the patterns of the re-politicization of the new generation follow lines to which the “old guard” of the radical left (i.e., the communist tradition in Egypt) is not accustomed. We have to learn...

The people are fed up with everything, with the police. If you happen to be arrested, even if it is only because of the red light, you will be beaten and tortured. There is the daily torture and repression from the police which was 1.2 million in number. Absolute impunity. Most ugly. People are also fed up with the mafia system. The entrepreneurs that the World Bank says are the future, are gangsters. Where do they have their fortune? From selling land of the state given to them by the state for nothing, for building projects; wealth accumulated by dispossession. They are squeezing the real entrepreneurs.

Lau Kin Chi: The military is said to own 40% of the economy. They are therefore defender of their own interests and not only an instrument of the state in defending class rule. Do they own it in private forms, or in so-called “state-owned economy”?

Samir Amin: The state-owned economy has been privatized, and in the process of privatization, the army has gained ownership. In some areas, a group of officers owns

this or that; in some cases, the army (nobody knows what this means) has the ownership. The term “Army Incorporated” has become a common term.

Lau Kin Chi: In some media reports, market economy advocates complain that the military is obstacle to a free, open market economy.

Samir Amin: That is duplicity. They have given money to the army, as part of concessions of the compromise between the USA and the army.

Lau Kin Chi: Egypt has had a long tradition of economic struggles. We all know about the famous Bread Riot of January 1977, when hundreds of thousands of people protested in major cities across Egypt, forcing the regime to withdraw the policy of cancellation of food subsidies, a demand imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. In the last few years, there has been a wave of prominent labour strikes. How do you think the 5 million workers would wield their strength as workers intervening in class relations besides being protestors for civil rights? Can you say something more about the federation of independent trade unions that was formed during the movement to bring down Mubarak? There have been many labour strikes after Mubarak was gone – rail workers, Suez Canal workers, petroleum workers..., signaling the people’s continuation of the struggle on the economic front. The fear of the authorities is manifested in the government attempting to introduce a law to criminalize strikes and protests that disrupt the economy. Can you tell us how the convergence is made in demand and in action between political and economic struggles in the movements?

Samir Amin: The wave of strikes in Egypt three years ago was the strongest in the African continent, South Africa included, since 50 years. The official trade unions are completely controlled by the state, since the time of Nasser, like the Soviet model of state control of the trade union. The strike did not start from the trade union leadership, but from the bottom. We can say it was spontaneous in terms of it not being initiated by the leadership. It was a success, a gigantic success. The regime three years ago wanted to send the police. The companies said no, it was impossible, because we could have all the factories destroyed. They negotiated. The strikes won very small concessions, 10% or 15% increase of wages, which was less than what had been eaten by the inflation of those years. However it won something important for dignity, and for trade union rights, such as no one would be dismissed without the knowledge of the trade union. They established themselves as new independent trade unions. They are now participating in the Popular Committees and the National Council. Indeed,

there are a number of economic and social demands, hence the strikes.

Lau Kin Chi: Are the people in Egypt critical about parliamentary democracy?

Samir Amin: Of course, of course. After the revolution of 1920, there was the parliament, but the first parliament could not govern.

Struggle on the economic front

Wen Tiejun: China in the 1910s also attempted parliamentary democracy, which also failed.

The street politics in northern Africa in the recent period are a continuation of the global capitalist crisis. The global economic crisis induced by the Wall Street financial tsunami was used by the financial capital dominant countries to rely on their political hegemony to further expand credit, causing global inflation. Contemporary monopoly imperialism's financial credit is no longer determined by the market. There is no possibility of the practice of liberal economic theory in the era of finance monopoly capital. The two "visible hands" in this era – the state's debt credit and the state's financial credit – are both created by the state's political hegemony. Hence, when the core capitalist countries face a crisis, their governments occupying strong financial capital status all resort to credit expansion and do not self-restrain by reducing the credit created by the government's two hands. In fact, the global economic crisis of financial bubble originating in the core countries can only lead to further expansion of credit in the core countries, no matter which party is in power. This is the visible, overt "conspiracy". Surely the global inflation will worsen. The global inflation would force developing countries which are reliant on the excess credit of foreign governments to import food and consumer goods to directly bear the cost of the financial crisis of the core countries. This means, when capitalist core countries directly create inflation through increased currency and bonds, they concurrently transfer the costs to developing countries.

When countries with a post-colonial economy of single-product economic structure such as Egypt are confronted with the two highs – high inflation and high unemployment, the nature of their street politics cannot but be the opposition between transfer of debt crisis from core countries and recipient of the cost of crisis in developing countries with a weak economic infrastructure. This is a fundamental contradiction of contemporary capitalist globalization. Such weak economic infrastructure and single-product colonial economy are created by the West, and controlled by the political mode of the West.

Hence, in relatively small developing countries encountering the two highs, a series of political eruptions would occur due to their shouldering excessive inflation transferred from the credit expansion of the global crisis.

In my exchange with scholars and activists from Africa, no-one believes the outcome of such street politics can alleviate the two highs faced by the people. This is the current tragedy of developing countries. After the street politics, any readjustment or substitution of the political superstructure in these developing countries may not necessarily mean a strengthening of the economic infrastructure, but may further bog down in crisis when the costs of western-style superstructure or ideology counteract on the weak economic infrastructure. The tragic continuation of the political turmoil in northern Africa is because whether it is a change of the person or the regime, whether it is dictatorship or democracy, the high inflation and high unemployment as costs transferred from the global crisis cannot be resolved.

Samir Amin: Yes, the deepening of the crisis, the means by which its costs are transferred to the developing countries, has been decisive. This has led to the events accelerating into an “explosion”. Yes it is quite clear that no answer to those challenges can be provided in the short run. Any real progress will imply some degree of “delinking” from capitalist globalization. We have entered a period of long continuous struggles.

Samir Amin: The system is strong, nobody can get rid of the system in 5 minutes, it is a long process. Nobody in Egypt is anti-statist. They feel the state is responsible for the economy. The blah-blah of the market solving problems, nobody buys. The state must take up the responsibilities, subsidies, control, nationalizations, etc. The strategy of imperialism is to disintegrate nations. We need to strengthen the autonomy of nation states for negotiated globalization, which would mean delinking, and creating conditions (not adjusting to global capital). We need a strong, popular, democratic state to restrict capital and to fight imperialism. There would be simultaneously revolutionary advances by the people for social progress, with long perspective for socialism.

Lau Kin Chi: Though Mubarak is gone, the army and vested interests are intact, not even criminalized. How can changes be brought about? There are always people’s revolts that remove the symbolic figure, but nothing much changes.

Samir Amin: We start modifying the balance of forces between the popular forces and the state. The present government is selected by the army. Insignificant people who

wait for orders. Those people do not know what to do, they discuss only what concessions we can give today to avoid the demonstrations of tomorrow, so it is not a government. The army does not want to take the responsibility, so they say this is civilian rule. To appear neutral, the army even put one communist in the cabinet, **Gudah Mahali**, minister of social affairs, nobody knows what he is in charge of. He is a one-man ministry.

Workers demand better wages and working conditions, guarantee of employment, nationalization of the bank, and role of the state to reorganize the economy to make it functional. The state sector remains important in Egypt. The process of privatization has been continuously stopped by objective difficulties. Foreign capital does not want it, local capital wants to do something different, to establish new industries. So the public sector is there, though declining for 20 years, from 30% of non-agricultural production, down to 14%.

In Egypt, we have major industries including textiles, agro-foods, chemicals, fibres, fertilizers, pesticides; they cater for close to 100% of internal demand. None of them is competitive for exports. Probably not because they are poorly managed, but because of lack of policy. It is not correct to say there is no industry in Egypt. The industries have never been export-oriented, but always for the local market.

Lau Kin Chi: But how competitive are they with imported goods?

Samir Amin: They are in danger, and that is precisely why even the Mubarak government did not completely open the market. The Egyptian bourgeoisie do not want it. They want to be associated with foreign capital, but not to be dispossessed.

Lau Kin Chi: In other countries, the opening up in the name of WTO destroys the industries.

Samir Amin: In 2002, Mubarak had a liberal prime minister. Previous ones were false liberals though they were pro-USA. The real liberal was an Egyptian capitalist, prime minister, he felt that Egyptian industries should be competitive for export, export-oriented, and he referred to China. But he was removed by the military in 2006.

Egypt is less food dependent than many other third world countries. Food, vegetables, animals. Rich peasants want to exclude small peasants who are not competitive. To give their land to the rich peasants to increase productivity. Many landless peasants migrated to Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Now they return, they move into the informal rural economy. Small peasants, while they cannot migrate, are menaced.

They form the small peasants' movement. The communists say they should participate in the intensification of production by semi-cooperatives. Not cooperatives in which the peasants give up the ownership of the land. The rich feel that rich peasants can do it at no cost to the state.

Lau Kin Chi: What is the size of the small peasants?

Samir Amin: We have 15 million peasants among the 55 million population. The vast majority are small peasants. The small minority own the majority of the land. The rich peasants are the base of the Muslim Brotherhood, for the state's conservative Islam. Their children become lawyers, doctors, officers of the army. These are people you meet everyday, not the very rich who go to USA. They are homogeneous. We now have pauperization of the lower middle class. A downward mobility, and unemployment for the youth.

Lau Kin Chi: Is the demand for land or for land reform proposed by the movement?

Samir Amin: The movement now is against the aggression of capitalism, but it does look for positive alternatives. The alternative in my opinion is associating the small peasants in the intensification of agriculture, to keep the people on the land. The Chinese pattern. The formulas for intensification are not unknown by leftist economic groups, who are acquainted with peasants' rights, like Wen Tiejun who knows agricultural problems and water etc. The objective is to make proposals for an alternative policy. The political result is to reduce the influence of the rich peasants.

Lau Kin Chi: what do you mean by intensification of agriculture?

Samir Amin: I mean higher yield per hectare, productivity of land, providing more labour, in order to keep people on the land.

Lau Kin Chi: the question of distribution of land is not immediate on the agenda?

Samir Amin: At this point, it would give a revolutionary attack on the rich peasants.

Lau Kin Chi: Not like Nepal. Under the Maoists, the peasants have seized land. But it was also the Maoist leadership itself that put a brake on the process.

Samir Amin: The rich peasants are not a transmission belt of imperialism, but allies.

The Egyptian reactionary forces are strong and clever, they are not lackeys, but allies of imperialism. Even the head of the army knew that it will not be USA which is only 400 years old to tell us with 5000 years of history how to run the country. I guess this type of language is also used in China, that we have a long history. Such language is used and over used, and manipulated. But this shows the people know this is true, not a fabrication.

Lau Kin Chi: The people's revolution cannot but address the question of redistribution of wealth and change in property relations. Is there any prospect of economic struggles going beyond demand for increased wages and welfare, or protests against inflation and unemployment, to articulate a socialist or communist agenda? Are there such programmatic discussions and debates in Egypt? Skepticism about a vanguard party is one thing, aversion to programmatic debate is another thing. The radical left may not be organizationally strong, but it can play a prominent political role in the intervention of radical thought guiding effective action.

Samir Amin: In the movement, there are people with higher understanding and are socialist, and they think economic demands should go in the perspective towards socialism. But there are also those who are not fundamentally critical about capitalism, they are only against this particular capitalism, so they demand only social welfare etc.

Wen Tiejun: In the recent years, the prices of the three staple foods have soared, due firstly to the expansion of agro-fuel, and secondly to excessive financial flow into the future market. Thus the rise of food prices is a product of the global economic crisis. In terms of the trend, resource shortage plus capital surplus will definitely worsen human security; the impact of the global economic crisis on human security is long-term.

Like most other North African and Middle East countries, Egypt's people have wheat as their staple food. The first biggest agricultural import product in Egypt is wheat, hence its food dependency on import is very high. In 2007, before the eruption of the financial crisis in the west caused surplus capital to assault grain prices, Egypt's import of wheat already grew by 60%. In 2008, when the global food crisis erupted due to the financial crisis, Egypt's wheat import continued to grow. By 2010, when global wheat prices had risen by 100%, Egypt still had to import huge amounts of wheat. Hence, from the ratio of high-priced imports in domestic consumption, half the urban population is finding it difficult to get food. Street politics thus erupted in urban areas. The peasants were basically not participating.

Samir Amin: Indeed the food crisis has been one of the reasons for the success of the movement, i.e., 15 million people joining on the second day a movement which started with one million.

The peasant movement is much more difficult in connecting. There has always been a radical movement since 1920. You have the latifundias, but there are also the rich peasants which are very strong in rural society since they are not the absentees, and they have relations with the government, the lawyers, the doctors. There are the middle peasants, the poor and the very poor peasants, and the landless. The situation of the landless, curiously, has not deteriorated in the last 30 years, because they have out migrated to the Gulf countries for work, and they have made some small money which allowed them not to buy back land, but to establish themselves in the grey, informal economic activities. The very poor are menaced, because the neo liberal market allows and facilitates them to be expropriated by the rich peasants, new capitalist landowners, and modern Egyptian companies associated with agro-business. They are very radical, they are not anti-communist, but they do not know what communism is. They simply do not know.

Wang Hui: The traditional left and the communist movement have a stronger influence among the workers, but not with the peasants?

Samir Amin: It is the weakness of the communists that they have never been able to integrate the peasants. The only people who went to discuss with them were the communists, not Muslims, not bourgeois democrats. But nobody has influence on them. But they have continued their struggles.

Wang Hui: In the third world, the mobilization and role of the peasants are always an important link.

Samir Amin: The peasants have mobilized in the small villages, but there are no links with the global movement. They do not participate in the Popular Committees that are discussing the transition.

Wang Hui: So the movements are mostly urban?

Samir Amin: Yes, also in small towns.

Wang Hui: Faced with the so-called soft transition tactic of the ruling blocs of USA

and Egypt, how do the masses respond?

Samir Amin: People are fed up with the American dictates. Egyptians are good nationalists. We ask, how can we be so low, that the American ambassador and president dictate everything everyday? There is also the social degradation. Unemployment and poverty is growing for the majority, inequality is gigantic. So all that combined. The government has no legitimacy. Now that is no more. Sudden explosions. People got killed. But they know that if you struggle, you may die.

Repercussions in the Arab World

Wang Hui: Sadat went alone into negotiation with Israel with the support of the USA. In the past 30 years, the Arab world is divided. Egypt, as the lead sheep in the Arab world, has had great influence on the Arab world. Even though Mubarak plays a special role in the Palestine-Israel talks, Egypt's international influence, especially in the Arab world, has in effect diminished. A friend of mine in Egypt was excited about the current movement, and told me that the world is finally re-discovering Egypt as an important country! The situation in the Arab world is very complicated and intricate, and the most influential countries are those countries under dictatorship that are pro-USA and pro-capitalism. How would this movement in Egypt affect the unity of the Arab world and the social movements within the Arab world? How is Israel's attitude towards the changes in these countries?

Samir Amin: Israel is nothing more than the USA, it is the enemy. USA and Israel will combine their strategy, for sure, to minimize the radicality of the movements. Israel does not do anything without the permission of Washington.

The developments in Egypt will have an echo, but each country is different in the components of the movements, the structures of the regimes, and the forms of their integration into imperialist globalization. Compared to Egypt, Tunisia has a higher level of education and of living, but it is **much less important, not because the country is small, but because it is vulnerable in the global economy, and the movement does not question capitalism. They look for neo-liberal capitalism with a human face, for shared benefits of the middle class against the monopoly of the ruling family. For that reason, the EU and World Bank have come in to Tunisia with a programme of relaunching the economy as it was, no change in the orientation of the economy, the same export oriented, tourism, etc. But counterbalancing the negative effects by redistribution of the national income and reducing the miserable areas. Not a programme of productivity. It is not anti-imperialist. It is basically much more liberal.**

Wang Hui: It seems the people in Tunisia are better organized, and the people in Egypt are more spontaneous. There would surely be an impact on Palestine?

Samir Amin: Sure, also impact on Syria which is very complex. It is very difficult to know the impact on Iraq. In Yemen, the movements in the north and the south are different; the north is relatively moderate, whereas the south is much more radical because the trade unions and the communist party are stronger. South Yemen is nationalist populist left and with Marxist rhetoric and some thinking of the radical left, the strong feeling for one nation. But it is like Korea, with a backward north and an advanced south. Yemen may split again, because the south cannot accept unity.

Wang Hui: How do you see what is going on in Bahrain and Libya? How do you see the similarities and differences between the movements in Egypt and the other countries?

Samir Amin: A domino effect, no doubt, after the movement in Egypt. But each country has absolutely different conditions. Bahrain is a very small country, but the majority being Shi'ite, and the monarchy being Sunni, there have always been tensions. The popular demand is only for constitutional democracy, and equality between the Shi'ites and the Sunnis in the kingdom.

In Libya, as you can see, it is terrible, because the Gaddafi regime bombed and killed the people with real bullets. I have no idea of the components of the movement and their demands. **Libya is not a nation. It is a geographical territory. It is the long history of the 19th century imperialism and with the Ottoman Empire which came out of it. It was not a nation before Gaddafi, Gaddafi did not transform it into a nation, and it will not become a nation after Gaddafi. Gaddafi came to power with the coup d'etat in 1969. He can go from one extreme to another. He has a nationalist, socialist rhetoric, but when he came to neo-liberalism, the argument was really funny. He openly said I am turning to neo-liberalism because the westerners like it.**

Lau Kin Chi: He openly declared it, that it was because the westerners liked it?

Samir Amin: Yes! Even with the NATO bombing, it does not make of Gaddafi a clever, leftist, nationalist figure. If we look at the change of his cap, we know this is the person.

Lau Kin Chi: The colour of the cap changing from red to green?

Samir Amin: Yes, absolutely childish. In spite of all that, he achieved a number of things with the oil revenue. The rights of women were not so bad. Four years ago, when Gaddafi moved to neo-liberalism, and gave the management of oil companies to foreign companies, the western power liked it, but feared he was unpredictable. He could the next morning take back the oil companies and give to the Indians or the Chinese. Firstly, his popularity is based on anti-west nationalism, and secondly, the Gaddadfa tribe where he comes from gives strong support to him. But the so-called opposition to Gaddafi is not a popular movement; from the first day, it has been a military revolt, with guns. After the first shooting, they called NATO to the rescue. Who are these people? It is the Muslim Brotherhood in Benghazi.

Lau Kin Chi: It was reported that they set up a central bank immediately in Benghazi.

Samir Amin: Gaddafi's army's response was a mess. The plan of the USA is to get rid of Gaddafi, to put in a puppet, and get the guarantee for oil and most importantly, the military base.

Lau Kin Chi: There is also the currency issue, because Gaddafi planned to have all oil transactions not in US dollars, but in Euros. That will undermine USA's position in financial domination. Saddam Hussein was purged for this same move.

Samir Amin: I think the military base is the most important factor. Libya will be a deadlock for a long time. If the western powers fail, Libya will be like Somalia. [Somalia has 35 governments](#), it is no country, it is total chaos, including piracy.

The difference between Egypt and Libya is that the movement in Egypt is not chaos, and the movement is growing as a strong political movement. It is relatively well organized. That is very positive and important. During the first days, there were a number of attempts to create chaos by the government releasing criminals, and setting buildings on fire, but these attempts had failed. The people have behaved maturely. It was maturity, not chaos.

Lau Kin Chi: What has contributed to this maturity? Is it because the youth are better educated, or there are some cultural traditions in Egypt?

Samir Amin: It is a combination of many things. The Egyptian political culture has been shaped by bourgeois liberals and by communists. The bourgeois liberals are anti-imperialist and democratic. And there are the communists. Their references are

the French revolution, the Russian revolution, and the Chinese revolution. No reference to the US congress. It is deep in the Egyptian political culture. If you speak of liberty, equality, fraternity, the people would say, yes we know. If you speak of the red star, the worker and peasant alliance, the people would say, yes we know. If you speak of the US congress, nobody responds. This is in the political culture: bourgeois democratic, and communist. Our revolutions are long, and not chaotic.

Lau Kin Chi: Yet in terms of the entire Arab World, there are chaos.

Samir Amin: The Arab world has inherited the division of the Roman Empire between the western and the eastern empire. The division is exactly in the middle of Libya. The division was made in 450. The Arabs came not long after, in 700, and inherited the boundary. The boundary is a deep cultural boundary. Even if all the people gradually get Arabic in religion and language, there is still the boundary. One thing is symbolically interesting. The eastern part drink tea, and tea is called *chai*, because it came to Mashreq through the caravans from north china. The western part, Maghreb, *tai*, because they get the tea through the Portuguese from south China, and the south Chinese pronunciation is *ta*. Cyrenaica, the eastern part, was Hellenized, the culture and language was Greek. The [Halifa](#) got its culture and civilization out of translation from the Greek. Tripolitania, the western part, was Latin, Roman. By pure chance, it was later colonized by France. The division is very strong.

There is a photograph in a book of geography of my father at school. In 1930, the boundary of Egypt was not the boundary of today. It included Eastern Libya. I am not saying this out of chauvinism. How did it happen? When the British occupied Egypt in 1882, what was important for them was the Suez Canal and the Nile Valley. They did not want to displease the Ottoman Empire too much. So they gave them the eastern part of the Libyan coast, Benghazi. The Ottomans were not interested in the desert; then, there was not the issue of oil. The desert was still Egypt's. Also in 1882, the French took over Tunisia, they were interested in Tunis, not the desert. Oil was not on the agenda. Not to displease too much the Ottomans, they gave them the coast of Tarabulus.

When the Italians went into war in 1911, they conquered the coast on west and east Libya. In 1915 when they went into the First World War with the British, the English to please them gave them part of the desert of the Southeast. This is how Libya was formed. Hence, it is not a country. The west was part of Maghreb, the east was part of Mashreq. Now it is reflected in the tribes of the west and the east, in their language, tea drinking, everything. I won't condemn Gaddafi, the poor man, for not building a nation out of that.

The nationalist, socialist rhetoric did not have much effect. In China, with historically deeply rooted nations, you have a sense of history. The Chinese can understand this. American people cannot understand this. USA and Libya are superficial and ignorant. The question of the depth of history is totally unknown to them. I do not know what will happen in the future. For the Mashreq, you will have the emerging countries coming together. Turkey, China, Egypt are the three historically rooted nations, they are not fabrications. But with conflict among themselves, they are not one, they are three. Not that we have been enemies in history, but conflicts in the ups and downs of history. These are deeply rooted nations. I say this in China, in Europe, that when you say to American people, they do not understand.

Lau Kin Chi: There are tensions between bourgeois democracy and communism. Which would you say has more influence among the young generation?

Samir Amin: I do not know. To answer the question, we need to meet and talk to many people. My guess is there is a wide range of the young. Some are more radical. Some are from the lower middle class, and some from the upper middle class. But they are homogenous on three things: 1, social justice; 2, independent international policy; 3, democracy and respect of rights.

Lau Kin Chi: The Muslim Brotherhood was not a legal organization yet it was tolerated, and in fact was complicit with the government. The communist party was repressed and kept underground. Were communist activities tolerated?

Samir Amin: The government has never tolerated the communist party. They have killed or imprisoned communist party members, but have not eradicated them.

Lau Kin Chi: How have communist ideas been maintained?

Samir Amin: That is a long story. The communist movement has gone through stages. For a long time, it has been limited by Moscow, and then the movement split into Maoists and Moscowites. Then they have roughly come back to confluence without being completely united. This is a long story. I have written about it in my memoirs.

Comparing China and Egypt

Wen Tiejun: It would be interesting to make a comparison between Egypt and China.

In terms of the economic indicators, Egypt does better than China. Its per capita GDP is USD 6,200 (IMF figure for 2010), and its economic structure has 50% services and 13% agriculture. Over 50% is urbanized. What is required of the structural adjustment from mainstream modernization theories is also “better” than China. The official unemployment rate is 9%, inflation rate 12.8%, which are much lower than the situation in China in the 1990s. However, according to the local people, actual price index is over 30%, and youth unemployment rate is also over 30%. Hard livelihood led to street politics.

Compared with Egypt, China’s economy is highly insecure, due to its high dependency on imports: 50% of basic raw materials, energy and food, and 12% of grain. Including sugar, fodder, over 80% of imported soya beans and edible oil, and cotton, rubber and timber, it is estimated that the dependency on land for producing these products would amount to over 20%. Hence, the question is not whether we have to bear the cost of transfer of the global economic crisis, because we are already deeply embedded in it. The question is just how much we are going to bear.

The countries now struggling against globalization are countries which do not have the institutional formation power of global governance, or the price setting power of the flow of key global factors, or the power of intervention by hegemonic politics, and they are basically developing countries. The problem is, most of the intellectuals in developing countries are pragmatic followers of western social sciences, and the post cold war rhetoric continued from pragmatism can only be rightist. This causes the research on the global crisis in developing countries to be stagnant, and cannot offer any explanation of the turmoil.

Lau Kin Chi: What would you say as to the outlook of China being implicated by the crisis?

Wen Tiejun: Contrary to the situation in the 1990s, the countries in greatest debt are developed countries, the worst being USA, Britain and Japan. Their tacit strategic understanding is that the government credit can continue to expand without need for repayment. Japan’s debt rate is over 200%, and USA and Britain over 100%. EU countries face a similar situation, with Italy 170%, and others around 60-80%. All the costs are shifted to the developing countries.

It is not possible for a small country to counter such pressure by its domestic policies. China, as a super large continental country, may be able to. The impact on developing countries would first be on single-product, small countries. The second round would affect countries importing resources, energy and raw materials, such as China and India. Of the BRIC, Brazil and Russia may encounter the problems at a

later stage, since they have both manufacturing sector and resources. Hence, one cannot exclude the possibility of turmoil erupting in China when it is negatively impacted by the cost transfer of the global crisis.

Lau Kin Chi: How do you think the so-called “China experience” can point to alternatives relevant for developing countries?

Wen Tiejun: The 60 years of China’s institutional experience is the successful internal transfer of costs of the urban crisis to the rural. The main reasons why China remains for half a century without massive starvation and with basic stability are:

Firstly, the negative externalities from the early stage of primitive accumulation of capital for industrialization and the medium stage of expansion of industrial capital have been transferred to the domestic rural society. This is internal transfer of institutional cost. The impact on the rural from this cost transfer is the decay of the villages, the impoverishment of the small peasants, and a whole series of difficulties for agricultural security. If not for China being a vastly diverse country unified for 2500 years, the severity of the cost transfer would have caused great turmoil.

Secondly, China survived the 2008-09 global economic crisis mainly because the government had in the previous three years massively expanded investments into rural infrastructure and formed a second capital pool at levels below the county, and at the same time consolidated the rural labour pool. When 25 million workers went unemployed in the first quarter of 2009, there was not any big turmoil because much of this labour was absorbed by the government investment into new rural development. Not only traditional agriculture, but also contemporary new rural development has positive externality for stabilizing rural society and the entire society. Now, politicians and intellectuals emphasize on agricultural modernization and urbanization, but these radical policies have the problem of massive negative externality directly threatening state security.

Some research finds that in the last 60 years, urban capital has extracted USD 2.64 trillion from the rural. The government reformist measures in the recent years have input around USD 0.46 trillion to the rural in order to strengthen the positive externality of rural society in bearing the costs of the crisis. Thus, in confronting the challenges of the global crisis shifting its costs to China, there should be strengthened inputs into the agrarian sectors, and not radically push forth western modernization.

Samir Amin: Be careful: Egypt’s and World Bank’s figures are meaningless. In fact deep poverty is more spread and visible in Egypt than in China! The growth during the last 20 years in Egypt has benefited only a handful of billionaires. The middle

classes have not benefited from it. That is not the case of China where the middle classes have continuously expanded in number and wealth. Not in Egypt.

Wang Hui: Do you think the “strong transition” can be completed, and what sort of corresponding measures are the people taking? What are your views on the future political changes in Egypt?

Samir Amin: It is a long process, and I do not know how this transition will continue, or if the government will give more concessions to the opposition. But what I can say is that Egypt is a country of long revolutions. The people are accustomed to it. The 1920 revolution continued for 30 years before the Nasser compromise. Everybody knows in Egypt that nothing much has been won, but we shall continue the process of struggle.

Lau Kin Chi: I agree that we should take the perspective of the people’s revolution as a long process of accumulation, with defeats in battles and wars in a long time-frame, but the eruptions will come with more frequency and intensity given the gravity of the domestic and global crises. I would take this perspective with regard to assessing the so-called “success” or “failure” of the Chinese revolution. **And I believe any perspective for the future depends on our reflection of the past.**

Samir Amin: When I was in the street in Cairo, I went up to a group of young people. I said, I am an old communist. They embraced me, and said, then we have a lot to learn from you. We want to hear you for hours. They are ignorant of history, but have sympathy for the communists. So I talked to them for three hours. In that huge building of the syndicate of journalists, they asked for my assessment of Nasserism, of this and that, what was the position of the communist party. There is a new wave of getting information, they want to speak of the past.

History in our generation was taught from a leftist, progressive point of view on society. Now they are brainwashed completely. I wrote a paper on 40 years of British occupation. For people of my generation in Egypt, it was absolutely common knowledge, with a progressive vision; not necessarily Marxist. Now, absolutely ignored at school. During the 30 years of Mubarak’s rule, the US embassy has redrafted all history books, and it was a caricature of Egyptian history. The young people at the building of syndicate of journalists asked me to speak of Egyptian history, people are aware they are completely ignorant.

The youth are coming out of a dictatorship and brainwashing of 40 years. It is good that they feel they cannot ignore their own history. There have been books

published 50 years ago on our history, which are not outdated.

We are working to build an archive. It is an enormous job. We already have 3 volumes, each 1,000 pages, on the history of the Communist Party of Egypt for the period 1942 to 1954. There will probably be three more volumes for the subsequent years. One, we collect documents, pamphlets, declarations. Second, we have 7 volumes of testimonies. Third, we have 200 CDs of oral memories of working class who do not write. That gives us an enormous collection. In addition, we have written debates, up to last year, just before the revolution. Now we have a proliferation of things that are produced: interviews, articles in the newspapers. We should be able to produce alternative perspectives.