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Arab Revolutions

Egypt's year of revolution

- IV Online magazine - 2012 - IV448 - May 2012 -

Publication date: Thursday 10 May 2012

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Carl Finamore returned to Egypt for ten days in 2012, on the one-year anniversary of the 18-day revolt that began on January 25, 2011. This followed a reporting trip of ten days in 2011. On that occasion he arrived on February 11, 2011, the day President Hosni Mubarak was deposed. On both occasions, he travelled to Egypt with letters of introduction from his union and the San Francisco Labor Council. He is former president (retired), Air Transport Employees, Local Lodge 1781, IAMAW and current delegate to the San Francisco Labor Council. He can be reached at local1781@yahoo.com.

Against the Current: Most of us have never witnessed the kind of revolutionary people's mobilization you saw up-close in Tahrir Square. Now that you've had some chance to absorb and think about that experience, what did being there mean to you?

Carl Finamore: The revolutionary events in Egypt are extraordinary by any standards. First, it is the largest country in the Arab world with the largest population and largest army. It had the only metro line in the Arab world until Tunisia built theirs in 2011. It is the premier center of cinema in the Arab world. It has substantial cement, steel and aluminum production with the largest textile plant in Africa, employing 20,000 workers at the Mahalla textile factory.

Egypt's relatively advanced development makes it easier to more clearly identify social and political forces and trends on both sides of the struggle – the military, youth, women, workers, middle and upper classes and the informal impoverished vendor-sales sector. In many ways, therefore, Egypt has many of the textbook features of classical revolutionary situations. The events are therefore much easier to understand than other countries of the Arab Spring. This certainly was true for me.

I arrived in Cairo just hours after Hosni Mubarak was himself driven from office. Driving past the Presidential Palace, car horns were blasting away. As I travelled further along the streets of one of the world's largest cities, I could hear cheers and shouts of joy from spontaneous street celebrations.

On one memorable incident, two days later in Tahrir Square, it was clear that the celebrations were not over. I was distracted from an interview by loud shouting coming from a city bus making its rounds.

Hanging out the window with fists pumping upwards, several dozen youth were shouting "The thief is gone! The thief is gone!" The people around me began laughing. Everyone knew what they meant. The deposed dictator did not even deserve to be called by his proper name.

Later in the week, on the traditional Friday day off, hundreds of thousands again filled Tahrir, continuing their demands for bread, justice and freedom.

Now, it is one year later. I arrived a few days before the January 25 anniversary of the 18-day struggle that started it all. Much has happened. There have been 12,000 arrested and subjected to impromptu military courts, more than during the entire 29-year rule of Mubarak.

Hundreds more have been killed in street confrontations with the military and secret police, more than during last year's January 25-February 11 Freedom Days.

In this one year, I saw the transition from delirious celebration to much more serious deliberation. During my brief two visits, I was privileged to witness the evolving, riveting dramas and provocative conflicts of revolution. It was everything you would expect, both inspiring and captivating. It stirred one's spirit.

ATC: We know that the anti-Mubarak struggle included Islamists, secular radicals and liberals, women, working class forces and others all fighting for the same immediate goal. What did you see of Egyptian workers' involvement in Tahrir, and even more important in strikes and labor organizing?

CF: The youth and middle classes originally called for a protest against corruption on Mubarak's declared national holiday of Police Day, January 25, 2011. Shocking everyone, reportedly 90,000 showed up in cities across Egypt with an unexpectedly large presence in Tahrir Square as well. The police attacked, just as they had always responded to protests. But, as the bloody assaults grew, so did the courageous determination of the protestors. Assemblies attracted larger and broader social forces all across the country.

But the real untold story of those days is the absolutely decisive role played by the working class. Workers participated as individuals in Tahrir Square from the first days, but around February 6, they entered the fray for the first time acting as a class.

For the next several days, Egypt experienced the greatest strike wave in its history. Dozens of cities were affected, production was shut down, commerce shut down and government offices closed.

This is when the dreaded and despised secret police murderers took off their uniforms and disappeared. This is also when the generals abandoned their mentor and sponsor. The high command simply could not depend upon the ranks of the army to carry out the Tiananmen Square massacre that journalist Robert Fisk reported Mubarak demanded.

Mubarak was gone on February 11. As Khaled Ali, Egypt's best known labor attorney and current presidential candidate told me in a 2011 interview, "You cannot understand the revolution without properly understanding the decisive role of the working class before, during and after the events in Tahrir Square."

ATC: There's a political working class and socialist left in Egypt, which doesn't get nearly the attention it deserves — whether because it can't be highly visible, difficulties of language and communication, etc. What's your perception of the Egyptian left after the Tahrir uprisings?

CF: While I did meet leftists and socialists and asked about them all the time in my interviews, I did not learn enough to make an informed judgment. My impression is that they are growing and playing an important role in suggesting the movement focus on building a mass movement that links the democratic and social demands of the youth together with the economic demands of the emerging independent workers' movement. Of course, they are also on the front lines of demonstrations. As I observed on both trips, these protests are often accompanied by the familiar rhythmic chant in Arabic of "the people united will never be defeated."

There is also no question that activists, broadly describing themselves as revolutionaries, have been targeted by the police. This occurred particularly in the November 11, 2011, protests on Mahmoud Street in front of the Ministry of Interior, where youth were targeted by the police for beatings. Around 150 were killed. Again, in December 2011, women protestors were attacked by the police. Women were killed, beaten, raped and submitted to humiliating and abusive "virginity tests." Because of the uproar, these are now outlawed.

These two months of murder and mayhem are known throughout Egypt as the Mahmoud Street massacres.

For example, I interviewed a revolutionist this January whom I first met last year. Today, he is blind in one eye, purposefully shot in the eye with a rubber bullet. He is among 35 young people blinded in one eye, and seven blinded in both eyes, by the secret police and army during those bloody confrontations in front of the Ministry of Interior, located just off Tahrir Square.

This brave activist still is determined to “fight those with power, those with guns and those with religion.” He frankly tells me, however, “It has not been a good year. We have suffered many losses from our front line and the second line of youth leaders is not as experienced.”

I would add that the problem of the Left is the same problem shared by the independent unions and the democratic freedom movement as a whole — poor organization. During the dictatorship, militant workers for example were unable to acquire the skills and experience of a steward, union officer or organizer.

Thus, even though the two independent union confederations each claim membership of over one million, their level of organization, structure, collection of dues, functioning committees and national coordination are “embryonic” as one leading supporter openly stated to me.

Thus, the best organized section of the population remains the military and the Islamists — not the reform movement and not the independent unions. The Islamist majority in both houses of Parliament is just one reflection of this dominant and dangerous imbalance of resources and organization. It heavily influences all political life in Egypt.

ATC: Can you describe the role of women?

CF: Repression always takes its toll on the struggle. For example, there was a noticeably reduced number of women among the hundreds of thousands in Tahrir Square for the January 25 one-year anniversary celebrations. By my unofficial, personal estimate perhaps only 15% were women.

Protective families, I believe, are keeping young women home more now. Last year, I estimated women were 35% of the mass gatherings in Tahrir.

While they did not throw rocks or stones in defense against the numerous police attacks, women played an active and visible role in the 18 days of the 2011 revolution, often standing between the police and front line of protestors. They also served leading roles in the organization of the occupation of Tahrir Square, in communications and by establishing a commissary and triage center.

But there is no tradition of an independent women’s movement in Egypt calling for the right to control one’s own body. The small March 8, 2012 women’s demonstration of several hundred on the steps of parliament, however, did project basic democratic demands for equality in jobs and education and to be considered equal participants in forming the new Egypt. It is a start, and a good one in the traditional discriminatory climate of religious intolerance.

ATC: What can you tell us about the major Islamist groupings?

CF: First of all, everything changed in the 1970s after President Anwar Sadat took over from Abdel Gamal Nasser who died in 1970. Wanting to introduce neoliberal Milton Friedman policies of privatization, Sadat began a campaign

to undermine and reduce the nationalized portions of the economy which had reached 51% at the end of Nasser's reign.

To shift the economy more towards private hands, Sadat also had to move away from policies of Arab nationalism. He famously gave a speech declaring that "I am a Muslim president in a Muslim country." This changed everything. The country and the people went from an Arab identity to a Muslim identity. The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and Salafists were enlisted in this effort to root out leftist, academic and intellectual supporters of nationalism.

It was a bloody affair. Of course, the Islamist orthodox wing also felt empowered to attack people of other faiths. This is the source and beginning, for the first time in Egyptian history, of attacks on Coptic Christians and brings us to the present.

It should be noted that the two major Islamist groupings, the MB and the Salafists, are not entrenched bourgeois institutions of power like the police and army. Both have genuine mass support, with the Salafists being more an ideological grouping, espousing the most extreme form of Islam orthodoxy. The Salafists are more immune to public pressure.

While they were forced by law to have a 25% quota of women on their recent parliamentary slate, the Salafists refused to post standard election photos of the woman and placed them all on the bottom of their lists. They do not believe women should play any role in politics or anywhere else outside the constraints of their interpretation of the Koran.

The MB is different. While it is staunchly Islamic, its political wing claims more of a secular bent and is, therefore, more subject to mass pressure. The Brotherhood has been around for 84 years. It has often been repressed by the state but it always continued providing religious instruction and a variety of charity work, thus earning the respect and allegiance of millions of impoverished Egyptians. This is the traditional social wing of MB with older, veteran, more conservative religious leaders who have served time in jail for their beliefs.

Apparently, there has always been a debate and some conflict over whether the MB should express itself politically. Today, a large and sophisticated MB political wing does exist. In fact, it won almost 50% of parliamentary seats in the upper chamber of Parliament. This wing is composed of younger, more secular-oriented, more middle-class and upper-class people with a social and political agenda.

As an example of how MB's political wing is influenced less by religious ideology and more by political pressure, there have been several splits. Several resulted in forming other parties. There is even a small but very vocal minority of the MB political wing that voices support to continuing the revolution. But the majority still clearly supports the military, opposing strikes and refusing to support the minimum wage increases.

The MB political leadership even held a counter-demonstration against women this March 8, International Women's Day, when several hundred assembled on the steps of parliament to demand more rights. The MB political wing held a similar counter-demonstration on the opening day of Parliament, while I was in Cairo, against protestors demanding more democratic reforms and economic justice. This was the first time the MB actually took these openly aggressive public steps to defend the status quo.

One very informed leading activist commented to me that he was happy the MB was now center stage and holding key positions of power. "Good, now let them be exposed for their conservative political positions in front of the whole nation. They will lose the sympathy earned from their years of repression. Now, they are collaborating with these same forces — the military, the U.S. and Israel."

ATC: Both during and after the election period, there has been sharp repression under the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), with thousands of arrests and, as you described, particularly nasty assaults on women activists. Were you able to have discussions about this problem, particularly the jailing of worker militants? At present, do you know how many political prisoners are being held and what we can do to exert pressure for their release?

CF: In my interviews with leading supporters of the two existing independent union confederations, both reported that union organizers were harassed at work. They could be transferred to another job or another location or be fired. In some cases they are imprisoned and tortured. It is also important to note that independent unions are still not recognized in the current constitution and could be declared illegal by the military at any point.

On the day before the January 25 massive gathering in Tahrir Square, the military very strategically announced the release of 2000 of the estimated 12,000 political prisoners jailed in the last year. SCAF also announced abrogation of the Emergency Degree under which Mubarak had ruled since the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981.

SCAF has proven to be very cunning, alternating brutal repression with concessions. We should stay tuned to the AFL-CIO-supported Solidarity Center for any defense campaigns that might be launched.

ATC: Tahrir was part of the inspiration for the Occupy movement in the United States and internationally. What did activists in Egypt know about what's going on here, and do they connect what they hear about Occupy with their own experiences?

CF: There was not as much knowledge about the Occupy movement as I assumed. Although there was much curiosity about U.S. politics, I did not observe much recognition that, in fact, Egyptian protests inspired the Occupy movement. But remember, I made an extra effort to speak to lots of ordinary working people and not just the politically active. I wanted to capture the mood of the absolutely essential middle layer of the population, caught between the main contenders.

The most interesting response was from a woman activist who immediately recognized that the Occupy movement in the United States showed that "the struggle was all across the world, corporations control everything and the people, nothing." And she added gleefully, "we can share ideas on how to protect against tear gas!" Another activist noted that SCAF publicized police attacks against U.S. Occupy encampments to justify their own aggression.

ATC: How would you describe the current mood of the people?

CF: This is, in my opinion, the most important and yet most difficult aspect to appreciate about today's political situation. The majority is exhausted. As several leading activists described to me "the majority is tired of Tahrir and tired of the fights with the police. The economy is killing us. Forty percent live on \$2 a day. They want stability, believing the illusion that it will bring economic prosperity."

Actually, while hard to accept, this is typical in situations where the struggle goes on and on. It is widely recognized in the American labor movement that workers on strike, for example, start to weaken after a few weeks. Egyptian activists recognize the reality that demoralization has set in, particularly in the very impoverished informal sector of the economy dominated by street vendors who suffer enormously from the 30% drop in tourism.

Working alone and already quite destitute, this large section of the population is subject to isolation and demoralization. Many others, not just the middle and upper classes, are influenced by the constant drumbeat of the

military, the government-influenced press and the Muslim Brotherhood for everyone to get back to work.

But there is an opposing political factor to this otherwise seemingly dreary picture I am painting. Neither the youth reform movement nor the independent workers movement have been defeated. Neither are they demoralized. Both have seen the power of their actions topple a dictator in a matter of days, Both have seen their power produce real reforms of democracy.

For example, locally, there have been important economic gains at work sites where strikes and protests have been staged. Nationally, there has been the recent doubling of the minimum wage to \$115 a month.

But both workers and youth, in my opinion, must realize that continued confrontations with the military and police, though absolutely courageous, must take a back seat to building a mass movement around democratic, social and economic demands that challenge the Islamists and military in power to address the desperate needs of the population.

Protests must move beyond confrontations by the brave vanguard to broad-based mass protests involving hundreds of thousands of workers, students, woman, and families that I saw mobilized in February of 2011. This is a shift recognized by some I interviewed. "It is now a long struggle and we are prepared for it" as one told me. "We are not just fighting a dictator now; we are fighting a whole system."

ATC: After all the fantastic struggle that's happened in Egypt, the fact is that the military is in control, it's backed by the United States even though there are frictions in the relationship, it hasn't lifted the blockade of Gaza, and a partnership is being formed between SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood even though they don't necessarily like each other. What's happened, so far, can be seen as a limited and partial political revolution, certainly not a social revolution despite the amazing mobilizations and heroic battles that have occurred. So how do you see things moving now and the potential of the struggle going forward from here?

CF: It might be a surprise that Egypt's military controls, according to academic, diplomatic and media sources, as little as \$15 billion and as much as \$60 billion of the \$180 billion annual GNP. It is very hard to learn about these state secrets but eyebrows were certainly raised when the military, in its own name, recently donated one billion dollars to the faltering budget.

In any case, U.S. military aid of more than one billion dollars annually is really peanuts in comparison to the military's real secret stash. This explains the slight measure of "nationalistic" independence from U.S. dictates sometimes staged by the generals to gain domestic support.

While it is clear that the military is in a rush to elect a parliament, craft a constitution and elect a president that would allow it to recede again into the background, it is also clear that it will always be the power backstage. It remains the most powerful institution after Mubarak's fall; as everything else collapsed, the regime was exposed as a thin layer of corruptible and detestable cronies.

After Mubarak left, the military was forced by the lingering massive protests to suspend the constitution, dissolve the Parliament and all local councils and dismiss the cabinet. Mubarak's ruling party, the National Democratic Party, was outlawed and its huge headquarters building adjacent to Tahrir Square scorched. Mubarak's bureaucratic invention, the Egyptian Federation of Trade Unions (ETUF) was in shambles.

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces was the only post-Mubarak institution left standing with any credibility â€”

and it has taken less than one year to expose them. True, they maintain the power, but minus their credibility. I consider the situation to be a stalemate favoring the military and their Islamist partners, who do still enjoy considerable mass support and far superior levels of organization.

But while the reform and labor movements have suffered, they have definitely not been defeated. They can regain the initiative, even against the terrible repression they will likely face. Improving their level of organization and national coordination, along with projecting immediate, democratic and economic demands that identify with the needs of millions, will be the best chance of reviving and maintaining mass participation capable of changing Egypt fundamentally.

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