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Egypt

"The Fire is under the Ashes"

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The Egyptian radical left has made some large strides forward in the last few years - defying emergency laws to protest against war, repression and the oppression of the Palestinians, and creating the successful Cairo Conference against Globalization, Imperialism and Zionism, which held its third edition in March this year. At the conference, two leading left activists - A, feminist and member of the 20th March movement, and K, spokesperson for the Revolutionary Socialists - spoke about their experiences. Interview by Luke Stobart.

LS: What difficulties do activists in Egypt come up against when organising?

K: We live under an imposed state of emergency that entitles the authorities to arrest anybody without having to offer any justification. There are 20-thousand detainees; torture is widespread -and torture in the state-security intelligence headquarters includes the use of electricity and burning. We also have an army of riot police of roughly one million! (in a national population of 70 million).

In 1986, there was a strike and demonstration by the riot police and at that time there were 600 thousand. We cannot have marches in Egypt. The minute we assemble, we are surrounded by police and they do not allow the demonstration to march. If the demonstration has 500 people, you would have 5,000 police surrounding you.

In Egypt if we had the right to demonstrate and march freely, our demonstrations would be of tens or hundreds of thousands of people. On 2nd April 2002, there were actually one million demonstrators across the whole of Egypt, as was confirmed by all news agencies. Demonstrations are not only controlled by surrounding them with police; when demonstrators managed to break out of the siege, they face water cannons and attacks using batons and rubber bullets. A number of demonstrators at the Palestinian-solidarity demonstrations lost their eye because of such bullets.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Middleeastconf.jpg>]

Third Cairo Conference against Globalization, Imperialism and Zionism, March 2005

The freedom to form parties, that they claim exists in Egypt, is not real; the government does not approve of any political parties except those who have reached a compromise with the Mubarak regime. We as socialists and the left in general build our organisations in a clandestine way; so we do not have to submit to any compromises with the Mubarak regime.

Workers in the new industrial cities have no union. In the old industrial cities the unions are under the control of a federation affiliated to the government. We consider these trade unions to be workers' "police stations". There is no right for workers to independently organise. Many of the professional bodies are also under control.

I am a member of the engineers union but my union has been banned for 10 years by a court order. The same applies to doctors' and pharmacists' professional bodies. We are under really oppressive conditions. But we shall fight and we shall win!

Does the same situation apply to the women's movement?

A: Yes, there are no independent women's political organisations. The Egyptian women's union was dissolved by Nasser in 1956 -the same year that Nasser allowed women to stand as candidates for parliament. Since then, women have been banned from having an independent union. But there are women's organisations and most of

them are trapped in the development discourse -doing income generating projects for women-; they are not political organisations. If existing organisations adopt a political agenda, they could be closed down and the people involved arrested.

Could you say something about the movement for change in Egypt?

K: The dictatorial regime is riddled with corruption, and it is now at its weakest point. The central demand of the movement for change in Egypt is to reject a new 5th mandate for Mubarak, because he has presided over the country for 24 years. That is why the Kefeya (Enough) movement has been started.

We revolutionary socialists are also against the inheritance of the presidency by Mubarak's son Gamal. The movement for change is also demanding the lifting of the existing state of emergency in Egypt, the release of 20,000 detainees in prison, an end to torture and mistreatment by the police in prison and a new constitution for the country.

As revolutionary socialists we do not stop at democratic demands only. We are also demanding jobs for more than 6 million unemployed people in Egypt. We are demanding to link the democratic agenda with the social agenda for change, and we have joined our struggle with that of peasants fighting eviction from their land, asbestos workers [who have occupied their factory against the harmful effects of working with asbestos] and other groups.

To limit ourselves to democratic demands would be a dangerous mistake. We play an important role in demonstrations and we are trying to unite all of the different leftist groups in Egypt. At the moment we are working towards building a socialist alliance in Egypt. At the same time we are coordinating our struggle with other movements struggling for change in the country.

There is a real opportunity to remove the regime in Egypt. And this is not an exaggerated claim; it happened in Indonesia and Argentina. In Egypt, as the saying goes, "the fire is under the ashes". There is a good possibility of a popular intifada (uprising). People's living conditions are very bad. In 1973 we used to protest and chant that "a kilogram of meat costs one [Egyptian] pound!". Today a kilo of lentils, which is the basic foodstuff of poor people's, costs 7 pounds. There is widespread misery and a terrible increase in prices and unemployment. All these conditions will definitely lead to mass uprisings. The regime has nothing to offer to solve all of these problems.

A: I work with the 20th March movement. This was established two months after the invasion of Iraq. The movement was inspired by the 50 thousand Egyptians that took to the streets in Tahrir Square and who not only raised slogans against the war in Iraq but who spontaneously shouted slogans linking the war with the Mubarak dictatorship.

I also work specifically against torture, which is widespread and not only directed against political activists in the country. Around 2000 torture victims have come to us for help over the past 10 years and the majority of those are ordinary Egyptian citizens.

What they share is that they are poor, marginalised, do not have the right phone number to call when they are in trouble and for some unfortunate reason they are taken to the police station -there are horror stories about what happens in these.

We have been to Sarandu (where peasants have been tortured and killed for opposing land evictions) and other areas. We try to be there with people rather than sit in Cairo and issue statements. We try as much as possible to organise events on the street. The government helps us in this a great deal because it refuses to rent us any venues for events! - if you want to rent a venue, you have to personally contact the state-security intelligence and ask for

permission; we do not negotiate with them on that matter - so we take to the streets whenever we can.

I am also a feminist. I struggle for women's rights and believe in feminism as a political vision. But I do not address women's rights only from a technical human/women's-rights angle or merely as an attempt to help empower poor women.

If you want to organise and mobilise the most marginalised sectors of society -those that have absolutely nothing to lose - in Egypt this means poor working-class women because they are also oppressed as women by working class men within the domestic sphere. If you want to go further and add religious oppression onto everything else, then a poor working-class Coptic [Christian] woman really embodies all forms of oppression that we have in this country.

Has the international anti-globalisation and anti-war movement had an impact here in Egypt?

K: Yes, of course. We have joined every international activity against the war. When the international movement has organised demonstrations, we have organised a demonstration as well. The international movement has given us strength. When we were arrested, the anti-war movement everywhere expressed its solidarity with us. I was arrested before the 20th March demonstration [against the invasion of Iraq in 2003] and the reason I was released was international solidarity. We are in one battle; we are all in it together. All of your activities have given us strength.

Also the international anti-war movement has had a big impact in correcting a mistaken perception that the world is divided, as the Islamists used to say, into Muslims and Christians. We Socialists would say that all of the millions of people marching against the war in the West are not Muslims and yet they are demonstrating because of an issue related to us. Some groups in Egypt, such as the Islamists and Arab nationalists, see that there is a conflict between East and West or between Islam and Christianity.

The left in Egypt in general believe in international revolution and the unity of the oppressed in East and West. We believe that the struggle by revolutionaries in Europe and the US against their imperial governments is complementary to our struggle against imperialism. We want to continue struggling together against imperialism but also against the oppressive regimes in our region.

A, you have been very involved in the organisation of the Cairo Conference. Could you describe why it was started? And how has it progressed from the First Conference to the Third?

A: The First Cairo Conference was organised before the war and was itself a demonstration against the war. The first Cairo Declaration was OK. It spoke about the invasion of Iraq but there was only a very vague reference to the Arab regimes including the regime under which the Conference was held. Considering that the Arab regimes played an important role in making the Iraq war possible, this was a weak point. The left was invited to the Conference only to participate in the final press conference.

The second conference was very different. We managed to get more people involved; it was held in the journalists' union and involved the participation of trade unionists and other groups. It was also a more political conference. But with the end of the conference the event ended abruptly.

This year I think we have something much much better. There is a real involvement by the left, who in fact convinced the Islamists and Nasserite [Arab Nationalists] to hold the 3rd Cairo Conference. We were part of each and every step of organising the Conference. And it was our idea to follow the conference with a forum which involved different sections of Egyptian society.

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We had forums for women, for workers and peasants and one against torture and dictatorships in the region. People worked together on this Conference and were exposed to each others' ideas and saw the extent to which different political groups can work together on a project like this. I'm happy with the result and especially happy with the forum activities. I can see that the Conference has really inspired people.

The bookstalls, exhibitions and films have turned the Conference into an exciting experience. There will also be a post-Cairo Conference meeting in which we will deal with some tactical issues that have arisen. The organisational committee consisted of 5 members from the left, 5 from the Nasserites and 5 from the Islamist movement.

In Europe there is a debate about whether the left should work alongside the Islamist movement or not. What has been the experience of the left in Egypt on this issue?

K: We work with the Islamists but not on strategic issues because there we disagree with them on most of their agenda and ideas. We coordinate with them on particular issues and positions, such as lifting the state of emergency and the release of detainees. We oppose the torture of Islamists. Along with the Islamists, the Arab Nationalists and other groups, we have established a National Committee of Prisoners of Conscience. Our position is that as revolutionary socialists we are sometimes with the Islamists.

A, how do you feel as a women and feminist working alongside Islamists?

A: My tolerance of working with Islamists is much smaller than Kamal's. As Kamal said, there are many movements for change in Egypt. But if you talk to an Islamist they will only tell you about the Muslim Brotherhood and the Arab Nationalists will tell you about Kefeya. None of them will tell you that also [radical] socialists are organising for change.

I am 50 years old. I have a long record of struggle. I can stand up to the Muslim Brotherhood when necessary, but some of the young women who worked on this conference were verbally abused by the Brotherhood because they wear short sleeves or something like that. On this issue I do not compromise.

Now Mubarak is allowing other candidates to stand in the general elections...

K: Mubarak says that in Egypt there is the freedom to form parties but at the same time his regime decides which party is acceptable and which is not. That's not freedom. Mubarak has established a National Council for Human Rights, but the Council has no authority.

Mubarak has established a National Council for Women's Rights, which is chaired by his wife, and at the same time his police force is arresting numerous women peasants in Sarandu. Everything he does is just a message to George Bush and the West that here we have freedom and democracy. But everything Mubarak does is devoid of any such content. His latest move is in the same vein.

From the outside it looks like he will allow other candidates to be nominated democratically. But at the same time he is regulating and restricting the nominations. The condition is that any candidate should get the signatures of support from 500 members of parliament and the shura council. Both have a majority from the ruling party and are appointed by the regime.

Will you call for a boycott of the elections?

K: People are confused about how to react. No decision has been made yet. There are two roads ahead of us. The first is to nominate our own candidate even if he or she does not fulfil the stated criteria. Through this candidacy we would create an electoral campaign on the street. We would lose the electoral campaign, but through the campaign we can mobilise the masses. The other route is that of boycott, which some people are putting forward. From my point of view this is negative. We should take to the street at every chance and take advantage of the opportunity we have been presented with.

A: I haven't decided yet which option we should take. I do think you can organise an active boycott as well. A boycott does not necessarily mean sitting at home and doing nothing. Because the situation is so oppressive no real candidate can fulfil the criteria and the oppressor will be very hard on anyone who takes to the street. That is why they want to restrict the candidacies. They know that Mubarak is going to win in the end, and the restrictions are not because somebody else might become president but because the absence of restrictions might mean we could nominate Kamal as president. We don't care about the presidency but we are in favour of the campaign itself.

In the Spanish state last March, Jose MarÃ-a Aznar was removed from office due to opposition against the war in Iraq. Do people in Egypt know about that?

K: We know about the demonstrations in Spain and Aznar's removal from office. Socialists are very aware of it and so are Egyptians in general too. We salute the struggle by the Spanish people that achieved this result and believe that the decision to withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq has encouraged other countries to do the same.

In our anti-war demonstrations here we shouted a famous slogan against the former Prime Minister Aznar calling him a hypocrite. The slogan became well-known and was repeated on other demonstrations. The slogan was "Jose Maria Aznar is a liar, a hypocrite and a donkey" (which rhymes in Arabic). So when he fell, it was a very welcome event. The donkey was beaten.