

Egypt, “transition in order” and a revolutionary situation still open

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Hundreds of thousands of Egyptians returned to take Tahrir Square on May 27 to protest against the persistence of figures of the Mubarak regime in the state, the repressive nature of the Military Council in power and the slowness of the “transitional government’s” reforms – reminding us that the revolutionary situation opened in Egypt in January, which has left more than a thousand dead, is not yet closed.

Contrary to those from fatalist positions that predicted that the Egyptian process is exhausted, the youth of the revolution have managed at rallying the support of significant popular sectors to demand the deepening of the rhythm and nature of the changes, demonstrating that the fall of Mubarak, far from being the end of the struggle, is only the beginning.

The fate of the Egyptian process has not been cast. There are a range of possibilities open in this increasingly bitter struggle between the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces. As positions become more defined, the undecided take sides and those that climbed onto the wagon of change late and reluctantly get off. Four actors have shaped events: the army, the technocrats, national-international capital, and the popular movements. The future of the Egyptian revolution, and with it a large part of the winds of change blowing across the Arab world, will depend on how the contradictions between these are resolved.

The transition’s gendarme

Since the fall of Mubarak, power has rested on the Supreme Council of the Egyptian Armed Forces (which we’ll simply call the Military Council) headed by Mohammed Hussein Tantawi, who was Mubarak’s Minister of Defence, and by Sami Hafiz Anan, a military man that has the sympathy of the Muslim Brotherhood. In fact, since 1952, power in the country has rested with the Army, and in this sense we can say that what has been witnessed since the fall of Mubarak is nothing but the continuation of this pattern.

While the media presented the army as a neutral actor before the January-February protests and while popular sectors got excited about an army that, supposedly, would be on their side, it is necessary to read the refusal of the army to attack the people (as did the police) as a political calculation that allowed the Egyptian ruling class to maintain the central pillar of their power in a position key to becoming the guarantor of their interests in the post-Mubarak Egypt.

The reality was soon cruelly exposed, shattering the illusions that some had about the “people in uniform”: on March 24, amid a wave of protests and strikes, the Military Council declared a law that, in effect, would prohibit strikes and other manifestations and public protests with the elastic argument that “they are harmful to the national interest”. Since then, Military Tribunals have tried more than 5,000 people, imposing extremely harsh fines and sentences of up to ten years in prison. As always, the first measure of the counter-revolutionaries is to “discipline” the working class, and to calm employers with draconian measures, clearly showing which side they are on.

Neither did the army’s hand tremble at suppressing the one and a half million demonstrators that took Tahir Square between the 8th and 9th of April to demand punishment against Mubarak, leaving two dead bodies in the streets. Along with the persistent State of Emergency, it is clear that the Army plays a role that can be described as anything but neutral.

The academic and leader of the new Socialist Party, Mamdouh Habashi, says in respect to the Army’s intentions: “*what they want is the transfer of power back to the old structures again, which*

are the networks established by Mubarak around the security apparatus". That these networks are alive is evidenced by the fact that, after the official dismantling of Mubarak's Political Police, it is estimated that a large part of the one and a half million officers that it had will be recycled into new security apparatus. The blogger and socialist militant Hossam el Hamalawy poses with absolute certainty that "*if you do not end this power that the army holds, no regime can be radically different from what we already know*". The challenge is no less given the popularity which the Army still has due to the mysticism of its history of anti-colonial struggles – even when, since the Camp Davis Agreement*, it has been nothing more than a submissive tentacle of the US, by which it has been directly financed with U\$1,300,000,000 annually. This popularity, in any case, is being increasingly eroded as its true face emerges with increasing clarity.

The transition's government

Like a screen for this Military Council there is a civic transition government, headed first by Ahmed Shafiq, a military man appointed prime minister by Mubarak a few days before he fell, who was forced to resign by massive protests in early March. His replacement is Essam Sharaf, a former ally of Mubarak and ex-Minister of Transport, who positioned himself on the side of the "pro-democracy" movement during the February days, and leads a liberal minority faction within the government.

The character of this transitional government is defined by Hamalawy as "*technocratic, full of figures of the old regime. But in reality, it is under the control of Mubarak's generals. They are the real power in Egypt today*".

This does not mean that there are no contradictions between sections of the transitional government and the Military Council, as indicated by the Egyptian anarchist Tamer Mowafy: "*We must draw attention to the fact that many of the key figures of the Egyptian bourgeoisie have argued, for some time now, that a more democratic regime would be more manageable and stable. Some sectors of power in the US have also thought this. I think both sides, while noticing the dangers of the current situation, think it can be viewed as an opportunity for rebuilding the regime in a new form that's more stable and more attached to the West*".

While the Army has shown itself to be more conservative, reticent to the most cosmetic of changes, we find in the transitional government people who, effectively, want a liberal bourgeois democracy, however rudimentary it may be, and believe it a precondition for developing the neoliberal model that has been imposed in Egypt since the mid-70s on a solid basis.

At present, political changes are taking place at a tremendously parsimonious pace: the 1971 Constitution still stands, although on the 19th of March a series of reforms were voted for – that some have adopted thinking it "better than nothing" –, in elections in which only 41% of voters participated – which may be more than Mubarak's rigged elections, but which certainly does not reflect too much enthusiasm from the population. Perhaps the most significant law that the government has passed, under the pressure of strikes and mass struggles, is the trade union freedom which has in large part broken state control over trade unions.

As things now stand, both the transitional government and the Military Council would facilitate elections in September, which would give power to a "democratic" government. Nobody has much expectation in the outcome of the process of "transition in order", as Obama calls it. The left that still bets on the electoral path is reticent about what might happen in these elections, as

the new party law makes it virtually impossible for new alternatives to be formalised by this date – it requires 5,000 registered members, a millionaire quantity of money to pay the registration, and the publication of statutes in an official newspaper, which costs another penny. According to Habashi, the bloc in power is trying to accelerate the process as much as possible in order to ensure that only the supporters of Mubarak and the Muslim Brotherhood would be able to capitalise it:

“we can not accept that the new parliament is composed only of Islamists and representatives of the old regime, who are the only ones with the financial power to contest these elections. Time is a very important issue. The plan of the counter-revolutionaries is to rush the elections as much as possible, to have them in September. This new parliament would then start to organise the constituent assembly with the old regime and the Islamists”.

The transition’s bankers

It is said that when waters are troubled fishermen profit. And this is exactly what the hand of the US is doing at this moment in Egypt, where, hijacking popular demands for reforms and for greater freedom, it is pushing to deepen the neoliberal project that has been implemented over the last four decades, first with Sadat, then with Mubarak. While demonstrators returned to occupy Tahir on the 27th of May, the G8 meeting in France was announcing a package of US\$20,000,000,000 in “aid” for Egypt and Tunisia. Egypt, it is estimated, would receive some US\$15,000,000,000 in investments, aid and loans from the G8 countries (above all the US), from the Gulf Emirates and from the International Financial Institutions. These funds will be used to “strengthen” the private sector and, in general, to promote a package of measures aimed at trade liberalisation and “institutional reform” in order to better adapt to the requirements of transnational capital.

Freedom, *mutas mutandi*, is converted into a question of the free market, in circumstances in which the people demanded freedom as an act of collective empowerment. In the same way, to strengthen the hijacking of the slogans and demands of the revolution in order to deepen the neoliberal economic agenda, the profound sense of the 25th of January movement is reduced to a mere protest against the “dictatorship”, leaving aside the social component and the economic demands of a people who rebelled hungry, and against Mubarak’s neoliberal ways.

Thus, the US is taking up the fall of Mubarak in order to deepen its economic policy counter to popular demands, for example, nationalisation and re-nationalisation of enterprises and sectors key to the economy (where there are already some significant gains), control of foreign capital, decent and quality public services, price controls, confiscation of money of illicit origin.

In order to boost economic reform, they can count on the pressure of the exorbitant Egyptian debt (US\$35,000,000,000 and an annual payment of US\$3,000,000,000, which would make the debt a lucrative business for the international financial organisations), 85% of which was acquired by the Mubarak dictatorship. Obama offered to “pardon” US\$1,000,000,000 of the debt, in exchange for a package of economic reforms which would open Egypt up to the US even more. Both the World Bank and the IMF have committed loans, as long as certain conditions are met regarding the modernisation of the economy (opening up, labour flexibilisation, etc.). And both the EU as well as the US and the medieval monarchies of the Gulf have made it clear that they have billions to invest in Egypt, particularly in privatisation.

A people in movement

On the other hand, people use the momentum gained with the movement of the 25th of January to push for the most basic demands as well as the higher ones. Popular Committees call for the pricing of basic food stuffs; independent trade unions appear everywhere with demands from better salaries to re-nationalisation of their workplaces; women's groups are pushing to consolidate the advances that they have been denied after decades of organisation and struggle, based on the new confidence that they have gained on the barricades; student organisations ask for substantial reforms to the education system and the removal of the people appointed by the dictatorship, adding their voices to the popular protest. The youth in particular, but behind them all the popular sectors, have lost the fear of the word and are not afraid to take the streets again if the situation warrants it.

What is clear with the protests of May 27 is that the struggle is not only still going on, but that it is also beginning to be clarified. The Muslim Brotherhood as an organisation have self-marginalised themselves from these demonstrations and attacked them, saying that there were no reasons to protest, evidencing themselves as part of the bloc in power. As such, they have no role to play on the part of the new Egypt.

The specific demands that the demonstrators are calling for, organised by the Coalition of the Youth of the Revolution**, are the acceleration of the trial of Mubarak and his collaborators, and for them to be prosecuted for political crimes and not only for corruption; a purge of the regime's collaborators in the state; restructuring of the police and withdrawals of those responsible for repression; independence of judicial power and purges of corrupt judges; establishment of a minimum wage that would correspond to the poverty line; as well as the call to draft a new constitution.

The Egyptian people are clear that they can not abandon popular pressure nor direct action in order to achieve their goals. As Hossam el Hamalawy said: *“There have been changes, but it has always been due to pressure from below. For example, one of Mubarak's trusted men, Ahmed Shafiq, had supported the Superior Council of the Army from the beginning, but it was the popular protests that toppled him. Also owing to popular pressure they were forced to restructure the State Security Police, Mubarak's Political Police, but when the people tired of these insufficient measures and took the case up with an assault on the headquarters of the Political Police, they had to put it down”*.

So, we are seeing a malleable and fluid situation that can be tilted to one side or the other. The counter-revolutionary sector has the weapons, the money and the support of the “international community”. The revolutionaries, however, have the support of the masses, who became conscious of their power and who tried the taste of freedom in Tahir and in the streets and squares of the major cities in Egypt. And they know, above all, there can no longer be an Egypt without them.

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