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Anarchism in Egypt, after the Brotherhood

An interview with an Egyptian anarchist about
finding himself trapped between the old regime
and the Muslim Brotherhood

Joshua Stephens

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The morning after the June 30 uprising that brought down Mohammed Morsi, I did an interview with Mohammed Hassan Aazab as he helped hold down four anarchist tents in one of Cairo's major sit-ins. Shortly thereafter, the military stepped in, removed Morsi from office, and set about rounding up Islamists and shuttering media outlets deemed to be partial to the Muslim Brotherhood. In some cases they shot party members under arrest, even massacring a number of supporters during prayers. Islamists have responded by blocking the airport road and carrying out low-scale warfare in scattered parts of the country.

For anarchists and others in Egypt who remember the last period of military rule after Mubarak's ouster, a complex situation has emerged: The Islamists they sought to oust are in retreat, but they're at the hands of a military that could just as

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easily put other grassroots movements in its sights. The time seemed right to resume my conversation with Aazab.

It's been nearly two weeks since the 30th. What's the view, from where you are?

Well, as we all expected, the old regime has started to rear its head again. The Brotherhood loses popularity every day. No new government has been formed, though, so it's not clear at this point what's likely to happen. Once a government is formed, we 'll know where the next fight'll be.

Now it seems you're basically stuck between the army and the Ikhwan [Brothers].

And the old regime. We're in deep shit. There's almost nothing to do but laugh.

It seems like the military — especially its leadership — would be more favorable to the old regime. The generals control something like 30 percent of the economy, right?

Yeah, that's right. The army is at the center of our economic problems. And there's less chance of addressing that now than there was before, probably, because at the moment people see the army as having prevented a civil war. So, they're basically beyond reproach. They can do pretty much anything, and no one will ask questions. And if anyone protests, they'll be deemed traitors.

The other day, when we were talking, you seemed to be personally struggling with your own feelings about the army's actions against the Ikhwan. What's your feeling about that now?

Well, I hold two feelings, you know? If we allow the Ikhwan to be the army's victim today, we'll be the victim tomorrow. On the other hand, part of me feels like the Ikhwan deserves everything that happens to them. They've been playing the civil war card up to now. So it's incredibly difficult to sort out, emotionally. I'm scared my hatred of the Ikhwan could ultimately cost me my humanity. When I saw the photos of the Brotherhood supporters killed at the Raba'a Adwyia mosque the other day,

I didn't feel anything. I remembered how Islamists had found excuses for the army to kill us on Mohammed Mahmoud.

At the same time, I'm afraid that we'll never see justice over the Ikhwan's actions and we'll regret the day we didn't eliminate them all. They threw kids out windows of tall buildings in Alexandria the other day for supporting the protests. Before I went up there, I was in the clashes with Islamists on the October 6th Bridge here in Cairo — they were shooting at us with machine guns, and all we had were fireworks and molotovs. Five people were killed. There's violence happening against Christians in Upper Egypt, and neither the interim government nor the opposition — or even the international community — is talking about it. The media only seems to care about what's happening in the big cities. Christians are dying and their homes are being torched. The Islamists need to be stopped, they are so dangerous in Upper Egypt.

Is any sort of defense of Christians possible, by means other than the army?

No, they're just leaving their villages.

It's interesting hearing you say you're worried about losing more of your humanity to a hatred of the Brotherhood — the idea that the impulse to eliminate them could make you someone you don't want to be. Do you feel like that impulse could make Egyptian society — or any society in a revolutionary moment — an unhealthy foundation for any new society?

Yeah, no doubt. We have enough social problems, we can't afford that.

What's the way forward, in your mind?

The key problem is the disconnect between our generation and the older generations. Young people need to represent the revolution. We don't need old faces anymore. As we say in Egypt, they are burned cards; we have no use for them.

What do you think that looks like? Student organizing? You don't seem optimistic about unions...

I'm very optimistic about the student movements. In the last year there has been a huge student movement, especially in the private schools. The Brotherhood's first loss was in the universities, actually. They couldn't challenge the revolutionary movements there.

What was the struggle there about, exactly?

It varies, actually. Generally it was around students' rights and fighting the management of the universities, often with the Brotherhood students supporting the management. That was happening in all the universities, and ultimately the student movements won those struggles – even when violence resulted, as with the German University in Cairo.

At Ain Shams University, the movement was combatting thugs and the corruption of the security forces on campus. At Misr International University, it was about the safety of the main road, after two students died. At Elshorouk, it was about medical care, after a student died in the university clinic. At El Nile University, it was over a building the government was trying to seize – something happening at many universities, actually.

Like a student center?

No, I wish. They wanted to take a classrooms building. They were actually trying to seize educational space.

How did these victories affect the movements? Are students still active?

Yeah, they are. And now they've started forming a union of the students' movements all over Egypt. They're working hard, a lot of meetings and activities.

What are the major issues at this point?

Releasing students arrested going all the way back to the January 25 revolution, the right to decent dorms in the universities, and kicking security out of the political life of the university.

Are students leaving universities radicalized?

It depends on the student. It's probably impossible to say, one way or the other.

Among anarchists in particular, are there aspects of this revolutionary process that you have all felt connected to, beyond taking down Mubarak?

Real organizing didn't really even begin until after Mubarak's ouster. We started gathering, talking to people, printing up writing about our ideas, and organizing meetings in downtown cafes in front of whoever was there. Then in the clashes on Mohammed Mahmoud Street, we found ourselves actually fighting beside each other.

I imagine that was a fairly traumatic experience. I found just walking past the murals creepy. Did that shape anarchists?

Of course. After removing Mubarak, working in the streets was incredibly difficult. Horrible things happened in Tahrir, and no one believed us. People believed the army and the Islamists. This last year and half, after removing Mubarak, there's a way in which you could say we were actually fighting our own community, and by the time Morsi took office we were just utterly dispirited.

That was why you told me you'd given up on politics when we met?

Yeah, exactly. I'll tell you something as an example. At this point, 90 percent of Egyptians don't believe that the army shot people with live rounds in Tahrir during the clashes outside the prime minister's headquarters after Mohammed Mahmoud. A lot of us were there and four of our friends died in front of us, and people act as though we're lying. Shit like that just crushes you.