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Egypt

Revolutionaries back on the streets

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On the second anniversary of the massacres of Mohamed-Mahmoud Street in Cairo on November 19, 2011 by the police forces of the military government, Egyptian revolutionaries went onto the streets to denounce the army and the Moslem Brotherhood and to demand the bringing to justice of the soldiers and police responsible for these massacres. Several marches called by the Revolutionary Socialists and the April 6 Movement as well as by prominent personalities started from various university buildings to converge on Mohamed-Mahmoud street with cries of "Down with the military regime", "Against Al-Sissi, the Moslem Brotherhood, long live revolution". The street was barred off with a banner "Reserved for revolutionaries, forbidden to Moslem Brothers, the army and feloul" (former apparatchiks of the Mubarak period).

The army had tried to prevent this demonstration by calling on supporters of general Sissi to come onto the streets in support of the military regime. They also built a monument to the martyrs which they hoped would absolve them of any responsibility. Finally, they placed giant screens in Tahrir square to broadcast the Ghana-Egypt soccer World Cup qualifying match. But Sissi's supporters were few. They were chased out of Tahrir square by the revolutionaries, the monument built by the army was destroyed by the demonstrators, and the giant screens distracted nobody. This was the first time since the July 3 military takeover that revolutionaries had gone onto the streets and made the political headlines.

Up until then, since the massacres of Moslem Brothers by the army in mid July, Egypt has seen the Brothers going onto the streets every week or several times a week to denounce the illegitimacy of the military regime and the government it has set up. But the army's very violent repression – a thousand or more dead, and several thousand arrested including all the main leaders, with the Brotherhood currently saying more than 10,000 of its members are imprisoned – and the total absence of support from the Egyptian people for the Islamist cause have led to the demonstrations gradually melting away. To the extent that the Brotherhood has recently proposed a peaceful negotiated solution to the regime. The terrorism of Islamist groups in the Sinai, whether or not it is linked to the Brotherhood, only increases the hatred people feel for them while allowing the army to justify its attacks on civil liberties and its opposition to strike actions.

In late October 2013 the regime introduced legislation limiting the right to demonstrate, go on strike and even put up graffiti. Several journalists were sentenced for having criticized the army, while the famous humorist Bassem Youssef, adored by the people, was subjected to prosecution for having mocked the military. Strikes (which continue despite everything) have been repressed, most recently that of the textile workers at the Samanoud factory in Gharbiya, on strike for three weeks to claim payment of their wages for September and improvement of working conditions, with dozens of arrests.

This political capitulation by the Brotherhood has probably freed up enough political terrain to allow revolutionaries to go back on the streets without being suspected by the people of being allies of the Islamists. Because if the Egyptian people do not support the army, they above all do not want the Brotherhood or their allies back in power. To attack the army, popular action cannot appear as support for the Brotherhood. At the same time this demonstration shows that the Egyptian people no longer believe in the promises of the government and the military.

For if the regime hits the Brotherhood violently and directly, it maintains a prudent double language with respect to the people. On the one hand, a wide ranging repression against civil liberties in the name of the fight against terrorism, and thus a fight also against strike action, and on the other a demagogic Bonapartist policy with respect to the poor – and in relation to the more high profile strikes. The government claims to represent the objectives of the

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massive mobilizations of late June and claims to draw its power from this people in struggle, against Morsi certainly, but also for "bread, social justice and freedom".

Thus the regime has given in to the demands of workers on strike at the symbolic Misr Spinning enterprise in Mahalla by using its own funds to grant them increases equivalent to around two months wages. It has promised a near doubling of the minimum wage in the public sector as of January 1, 2014. It has promised to limit the highest wages, an end to military courts for civilians and the end of censorship on state media, the recognition of new trade unions, gender equality and so on.

If these promises have sown momentary illusions and led to a wait and see attitude on the part of the people it is increasingly clear to many that these are only empty promises. Thus the increase in the minimum wage does not affect the private sector and seems to amount to not very much as the concrete details emerge. The limitation on maximum salaries will be at 35 times higher than the minimum wage, whereas for example in the world's 10 richest countries the ratio is "only" 20 times higher. Gender equality is promised in the context of Sharia, which means nothing will change. The least religious pressure will be reflected by prosecutions of atheists. And everything is subject to amendment.

Thus we have seen the progressive coming apart of the ruling coalition. In early November 2013 a split occurred in Tamarod (Rebellion), which supports the regime, with some of its members saying they would return to the street, while its leadership demanded the resignation of a prime minister incapable of meeting popular expectations. The left wing Tagammu movement took its distance, accusing the constitutional committee [of 50 selected persons] that is drawing up the draft of the new Constitution of favouring the rich and ignoring women, Christians and Nubians. While Sabahi, the Nasserite candidate at the last presidential elections, has withdrawn from the next ones in favour of Sissi, his supporters have demonstrated recently to demand that he reverse his decision.

On October 26, 2013 there was the first non-Islamist demonstration against the law restricting rights to demonstrate and go on strike. On November 6, 2013 the Ultras football fans surrounded the High Court to denounce the arrest of some of their members. On November 14, 2013 the regime cancelled the curfew which most people did not respect and suppressed the state of emergency. Finally, on November 16, 2013 a revolutionary activist, Ahmed Harara, for the first time in months, dared to attack general Sissi on television, accusing him of being a criminal, responsible for the November 2011 massacres.

The atmosphere is changing. And this could well accelerate given an inflation rate of 11.5% in November while many Egyptians go hungry.