

The Egyptian Political Debate on the Youth and the January 25th Revolution (Part 2)

Mervat F. Hatem

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Summary:

This is the second part of a discussion of the role that the youth has played in the Arab uprisings of 2011 and the political transitions that followed. In part I, I reviewed some of the multi-disciplinary work done in the field of Middle East studies that explained the demographic, economic and social developments that contributed to the youthful character of Arab societies and the challenges that they posed. I also suggested that Middle East political science's preoccupation with authoritarian stability explained its lack of interest in the study of the "youth" as a non-state actor that highlighted changes and forms of political mobilization that took place outside formal political spaces and institutions.¹

In part II of this discussion, I begin with an examination of the political context of the Egyptian debate on the youth and the roles that they played in the revolutions of January of 2011 and June 2013. Next, I discuss how the youth emerged as specific objects of a heated debate in many newspaper articles and television programs in November and December of 2013 becoming an extension of the partisan political debate that sought to exclude the Muslim Brotherhood and their youthful supporters from politics following the July 3, 2013 coup that deposed President Mohammed Mursi. The demonization of the Muslim Brotherhood, as a violent threat to the ability of state institutions (especially the police and the military)¹ to function and restore political order was used by the government to emphasize the need to close ranks and respond to regional and international threats to national security. The protest activities of the youth in general (as supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and their liberal and revolutionary counterparts) were harshly criticized as having contributed another source of political instability and insecurity. As such, this debate justified the authoritarian state's political marginalization of the youth and the attempt to force their exit from the political arena.

Analysis:**The Second Egyptian Revolution of June 30, 2013 and the Rise of a New Authoritarian State**

The massive public protests that broke out on June 30, 2013 calling for early elections in Egypt reflected the heightened political polarization that was successfully used to shorten the tenure of the Mursi government. Egypt's first democratically elected president won free and transparent elections, but failed during his first year in office to cement alliances with the supporters of the old regime¹ and/or make any political concessions to his liberal and youthful rivals. As a result, both groups became united in their claim that he and his government represented a new form of exclusionary (authoritarian) politics. They joined forces in their support of a new youth group, *Tamarod* (Rebel) that spearheaded a campaign to collect signatures in support of early presidential elections. By June 30, 2013 when massive protests broke out, the group claimed that it had collected 22 million signatures in support of this popular demand.²

For a large segment of the Egyptian public as well as the many engaged youthful activists, the successful protests on June 30 represented a second revolution (i.e. the outbreak of peaceful massive protests unified in the demand to force an unpopular government out of office) in the span of 3 years. The support of the Egyptian military, as a key national institution, was critical for the success of the protests that forced President Hosni Mubarak out of office in February of 2011 and those that delivered a similar outcome for the unpopular Muhammed Mursi on July 3, 2013. In this widely held construction of the Egyptian revolution the continuities shared by the January 25, 2011 revolution and that of the one that unfolded on June 30, 2013 are emphasized with the latter providing a correction of the course of the former and the fulfillment of its goals.

It is equally true that the role that the military played in deposing Egypt's first democratically elected president (who refused to agree to early elections on July 3, 2013) changed the course of the Egyptian political transition leading to their active return to governing. It installed a new interim president who was charged with a new political road map that went beyond the call for early elections to include the drafting of a new constitution to replace that which was popularly approved in 2012 followed by parliamentary and presidential elections. In this process, the Egyptian military emerged first as the power behind Adly Mansour, the civilian interim president who was formerly the head of the High Constitutional Court, who faithfully executed the task of

setting the stage for the election of former Field Marshall Abdel Fattah al-Sisi as president in June 2014.

This political context coupled with the violent breakup of the Muslim Brotherhood's sit ins at the Rab'a al-Adawiyya mosque and al-Nahda square in support of the return of president Mursi to power contributed to the rise of a new authoritarian state that presented al-Sisi and the military as popular saviors from a political transition that constantly presented the Egyptian public with difficult choices. The arrest of the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood and the repression of its Islamist political base by the resurgent police forces were accompanied by a partisan political debate that mobilized Egyptian public opinion in favor of the exclusion of the Muslim Brotherhood from politics as a terrorist (violent) group that challenged wishes of the general public. While the new popularly based military authoritarian state³ presented itself as providing protection to an Egyptian public that was increasingly anxious about the escalating spiral of violence, what it successfully achieved was the completion of the process of counterrevolution.

The Political Marginalization of the Youth as a Revolutionary Actor:

The state and privately run media campaign that took aim at the youthful leaders of the 2011 revolution at the end of 2013 should be seen as part of the unfolding state effort to politically eliminate or discredit potential contenders, who can claim revolutionary legitimacy in connection to the 2011 revolution or seriously remind the Egyptian public of how the military represented by SCAF (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces) in 2011-2012 and since the coup has been largely unsympathetic to the youth that had led the revolution and its goal of liberty, dignity and social justice. It coincided with the attempt by the Brotherhood to rally its student supporters at different Egyptian universities to continue their protests against the coup. The new level of violence associated with these youthful protests on different campuses provided an opening, from which the opponents and/or the critics of the youth's prominent engagement in liberal and Islamist politics alike could deliver a harsh assessment of their contributions to the Egyptian political transition.

In the many articles appearing in the Egyptian press during this period, some reporters and commentators asked questions or offered analyses that only emphasized their failings or the negative aspects of their political engagement. Some asked why they were very good at protesting, but less capable of presenting solutions to problems or participating in decision making.⁴ Others suggested that many of coalitions that claimed to represent revolutionary youth

offered attempts by some to take advantage of the revolutionary label for personal gain.⁵ A third group wondered why the youth was not able to engage in the hard work of building institutions that gain popular support. Some pointed out how they were easily misled by other political forces including the Muslim Brotherhood as well as other political parties.⁶ Their embrace of popular forms of mobilization that were leaderless and/or learning from youth involvement in other parts of the world were seen as at best misguided or worse falling into the hands of national, regional and political enemies of the state and undermining its ability to implement the revolutionary agendas for change.

As part of the discrediting of the leadership of the youth groups, including April 6, independent bloggers and human rights activists, they were described as mercenaries as well as a fifth column serving the interests and the agendas of suspect national, regional and international actors.⁷ These claims were not new and were frequently levelled at civil society associations by the first two governments appointed by SCAF in 2011-12 with Faiza Aboul Naga, the minister of International Cooperation, leading the charge. She accused international donors and their local allies of undermining state/Egyptian interests.⁸ The goal of this earlier campaign was to silence these groups that were viewed as critical of the government allowing the latter to claim some legitimacy that it lacked.

These arguments were dusted up and used against the youth groups and their leadership. The April 6th youth group, that was active before the revolution creatively using social media to support acts of civil disobedience, including the large Mahalla strike in 2008 and playing a key role in the lead up to the January 25, was frequently accused of being paid mercenaries of foreign (US) donors taking international trips to attend meetings that had dubious international agendas. What was galling about this particular tactic was the fact that it overlooked how the Egyptian army was the second largest recipient of US military aid after Israel. Yet, Egyptian governments did not see the huge aid package that it received or the close military and political ties with its US counterparts as casting suspicion on its nationalist credentials.

To give some political punch to the old and familiar claims and arguments, they were accompanied by the leaking of secret recordings of conversations among some of these activists gossiping about their trips overseas to address international audiences. The rivals of these youth groups and figures, both on the right and the left, quickly used them to call for legal prosecution of these figures of treason.⁹ Not only were there no legal grounds for these charges, but these secret recordings violated the right to privacy that

these activists had¹⁰ and which was protected by the 2014 constitution. The recordings added fuel to the fire in the campaign to present the prominent leaders of the Egyptian youth groups in a less favorable light and through them the January 25th revolution, which some conservative commentators began to discuss as part of the representation of the Arab Spring as an international conspiracy intended to bring the representatives of political Islam to power.¹¹

Finally, the passage of a new protest law (*qanun al-tazahur*) that challenged the right to peaceful protest and imposed stiff penalties on those who engaged in it using some of the old security concerns that were used by the Mubarak government before 2011¹² contributed to a new confrontation between the new government and some of the most prominent leaders of these youth groups. All the youth groups and human rights groups criticized the law pointing out how it narrowed the right to protest which Egyptians acquired as a result of the January 25th revolution. In a symbolic gesture, Alaa Abdel Fattah, the well-known blogger, Ahmed Douma, a human rights activist and Mohammed Adel and Ahmed Maher of the April 6 youth movement demonstrated in protest of the law. They were quickly arrested, charged with a long list of crimes against anyone who dares to protest and given stiff sentences and fines. Despite the uproar inside and outside Egypt about the law and the way these iconic figures of the youth movement have been harshly treated, the point was to use them to intimidate others who may be tempted to protest.

This discussion, the new law and the state's large scale indiscriminant arrests of young people including those without any political interests confirmed what the intellectual debate in part I suggested i.e. authoritarian states tended to feel threatened by popular forms of political mobilization with which the youth had been associated. It provided another reason why the state was eager to exclude them and their policy concerns from the political arena. This contradicted the claims made by the post-coup governments that they represented the correction of the course, tactics and goals of the January revolution especially the improved ability to deliver the goals of liberty, dignity and social justice. Instead, they suggested an actual return to the old national security state, its political discourses and its authoritarian (exclusionary) institutional strategies without indications of how it intended to manage the effects of their narrowed base of support that contributed to the revolutionary demands for change.

About the author: Mervat F. Hatem is a visiting professor from the Department of Political Science of Howard University, Washington DC.

¹ For a more detailed discussion of the issues and the perspectives of all the national and international actors, please see Mervat Hatem, "The Debate on the July 2013 Military Coup in Egypt: It is about Much more than the Definition of a Coup", (Parts I & II), Center for Mellemøstudier (October and November 2013), http://static.sdu.dk/flexpaper/aspnet/Flex_document.aspx?doc=/mediafiles/3/2/3/{32343A2D-841B-4B69-954B-674C41C8CF6D}MH1013.pdf;

http://static.sdu.dk/flexpaper/aspnet/Flex_document.aspx?doc=/mediafiles/3/7/B/{37BCEAAA-C02D-4EA0-94DC-3C3F70F67C35}MH1113.pdf.

² Mohanad al-Sabagh and Islam Qalash, "Tamarod .. Min Huna Wulidat Thawrat June 30", *Al-Tahrir* (December 31, 2013), p. 8.

³ Stacher, "Deeper Militarism in Egypt"

⁴ Shaden Shehab, "What is happening to Egyptians? *Al-Ahram Weekly* (December 19, 2013), p. 2.

⁵ Heba Said, "Harakat Thawriya bila Raseed Sha'bi", *Al-Ahram* (December 1, 2013), p. 5.

⁶ Muhammed al-Amin, "Harakat Tamarod Tadkhul al-Mathaf", *Al-Masry al-Youm* (December 19, 2013), p. 7, Shaima' Abdel Latif, "Aly Goma", *Al-Tahrir* (December 14, 2013), p. 8.

⁷ Lutfi al-Kholi, "Lil Thuwar, Wujuh Kathira", *Al-Misri al-Youm* (January 5, 2014), p. 17; Walid Tughan, "Al-Tagris al-Halal li Nushata' al-Haram", *Rose Wl-Yousef* (January 1, 2014), p. 18.

⁸ Khaled Dawoud, "NGO Blunder Backfires" *Al-Ahram Weekly* (March 8-14, 2012), p. 1.

⁹ Hazem Abu Douma, "Al-Khadi'a al-Kubra", *Al-Ahram* (December 13, 2013) p. 5.

¹⁰ Abdallah al-Sinawi, "Thalath Thawarat wa Thalath Tahadiyat", *Al-Shorouk* (January 15, 2014), p. 14.

¹¹ Fahmy Howeid, "Al-Rabi' al-Muftara Alayhi", *Al-Shorouk* (January 1, 2014), p. 16.

¹² Khaled Daoud, "Al-Ifraq li Douma, Ala'a wa Maher", *Al-Tahrir* (December 7, 2013),