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# Tough Days Ahead in Egypt

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The most populated country in the Arab world took the day off on Wednesday, January 25.

Tahrir Square was overloaded with people stretching and squeezing into every nook and cranny on adjacent streets, storefront alcoves and building doorways. Still, thousands were simply unable to ever reach the center.

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But there was something equally noteworthy on this day—the total absence of the police and army. In a country where the army has far too much control in all affairs of state, on this day they could not be found.

Nonetheless, it must be said that the army's presence was very much felt. For example, the largest center stage in the middle of the square was controlled by their key ally, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). Continuous "God is Great" and pro-military chants were consciously intended to counter opposition slogans of the protest movement.

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Beyond the center stage, however, were dozens of political groups, student and youth organizations and independent union contingents calling for a second revolution. They completely engulfed the areas along the perimeter of Tahrir.

After a series of recent bloody attacks against young protestors, along with continued repression of worker protests, a clear statement was made on January 25 that voices of the youth and workers, in particular, would not be muted.

Nonetheless, Egypt's generals have shown themselves far more astute in dealing with raging social unrest and complex political issues than the ousted dictator.

For example, Field Marshall Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, head of the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), announced on January 24 that nearly 2000 political prisoners being held for military trials would be released and that the repressive 30-year Emergency Decree giving the government dictatorial powers would be lifted.

These and other calculated political gestures by SCAF undoubtedly improves their public image and impresses large sections of the population that desperately want to believe things will improve now that Mubarak is gone.

But it doesn't fool seasoned political activists because it contrasts so sharply with the brutal military and police assaults in November and December. Those assaults left several thousand young men and women injured and around 150 killed.

Plus, there has been no real improvement in the economy. The demands of workers remain largely unaddressed except for a modest increase in the minimum wage from around \$53 a month to \$115 a month. Newly formed independent unions were demanding at least \$200 a month.

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The Egyptian working class is quite large and remains the most troublesome problem for the generals. They understand the critical role workers played in ending Mubarak's reign by conducting the largest strike wave in Egyptian history.

"Workers were in Tahrir, but as individuals," Marian Fadel told me, "then, on February 7, 8 and 9, they began acting like a class. Strikes occurred everywhere, leading the generals to turn on Mubarak." Marian is an attorney with a Master Degree in human rights. She is also Egypt program officer for the U.S. AFL-CIO-supported Solidarity Center.

Since those heady days, Fadel continued, "the independent trade unions have been obstructed at every step when they try to organize. Organizers are transferred to different locations, fired and even arrested and tortured."

In addition, she explained, "the law enacted in 1976 permitting only one union in a workplace and only one union federation in the country is still on the books. It obviously favors Mubarak's corrupt Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), which is trying to regroup with support from the military and the Muslim Brotherhood."

The ETUF supported Mubarak and, in fact, the former ETUF president is now in jail for helping lead the grotesque camel rider attacks against young people in Tahrir Square last year.

### **"The Economy is Killing People"**

Nonetheless, after one year of protest and even with so many reforms left unaddressed, there is no doubt large sections of the population are feeling exhausted and want all the strife to end.

"The economy is killing people," Fadel observed.

"Many people are tired of Tahrir, tired of the protests and tired of the battles with the military. They mistakenly believe that everything will improve and get back to normal if protestors just stop asking for so much."

I noticed this division last year on my first trip to Cairo. Almost immediately after Mubarak was deposed, the army and large sections of the middle and upper classes were calling for a return to work. This is the drum beat continuously echoed by the media and the military with their allies in the Muslim Brotherhood.

But, slowing of the protests did not nor could not happen immediately after the battles that toppled Mubarak. There was too much enthusiasm and too many outstanding social and economic issues left unresolved. The people had tasted victory and they wanted more.

But, now, after one year of political maneuvers crafted by the military, conducting elections, establishing a parliament and promising the installation of a newly elected president on July 1, an exhausted population is confused, especially those influenced by the 70 per cent Islamist majority in parliament.

Of course, there are still dissident voices. Nadea, for example, is a 48-year old translator holding a sign in Tahrir demanding the military leave the government. She was with a group of friends who recently formed Woman for Change.

"We all fought for a civil society and what we got is a military government and an Islamist parliament. Neither of them are civil," she told me as she threw up her hands.

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Amid the absolutely critical political debate in Egypt today, there is also, according to many political activists I interviewed, some despair and demoralization. This is particularly true among the impoverished vendors in the informal sector who often earn only \$2 a day and suffer dearly from the 30 per cent drop in tourism.

Walking the streets of Cairo, you see vivid examples of their wretched poverty. Children are everywhere working as vendors helping their family earn an income. Of course, this means they are not in school.

The United Nations records 40 per cent illiteracy rate and a 40 per cent poverty rate in Egypt.

It is somewhat different for the organized working class. In fact, over the last several years, even under Mubarak, the AFL-CIO recorded some 1900 mostly illegal strikes occurring from 2004 to 2008. These actions earned some important concessions from the government.

“Strikes continue today,” according to 23-year old Nadeem Mansour, executive director of the prestigious labor and human rights’ organization, the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR). “But the new independent unions put most of their energy, now, into strengthening their local chapters still in their infancy.”

Another 23-year old I met in Tahrir, Hussein, proudly announced himself a revolutionary. He offered this analysis: “The working class has a better sense of their own collective power and does not feel the same exhaustion and demoralization of their far more isolated brothers and sisters in the informal sectors of the economy.”

“And, of course, the other revolutionary factor in Egypt, is the youth, who must continually ally with the demands of the working class,” he told me.

I heard this often. According to the World Bank, there is 90 per cent unemployment among those under 30 years of age, now comprising 60 per cent of the population. Under these conditions, the youth have set an example of committed activism under the most violent of circumstances.

“I lost an eye on November 19 when I was hit by a rubber bullet,” 30-year old Malek Moustafa told me. He is media director for one of the most prominent human rights organizations in Egypt, the Hisham Mubarak Law Center.

“It was the first day of the month-long protests opposing military rule and demanding real democratic and economic reforms. Nearly 150 were killed by the military and police assault on Mohamed Mamoud street right off Tahrir and in front of the Ministry of Interior.”

“It was like bloody Beirut, total mayhem with the army and police dragging bodies into trucks probably to be dumped in the desert. And, it seemed they were firing purposely at the eyes,” a veteran AP photographer I befriended in Cairo told me in a separate interview.

“Among the several thousand wounded,” Malek said, “are another 35 who lost one eye like me, seven who lost both eyes and many others with critical and permanent injuries.”

The large, enthusiastic youth presence in Tahrir this January 25, following the bloody days of the last few months, certainly shows their passion and determination is undeterred. Of course, the revolutionary youth know the activist minority must ultimately win over the more conservative majority who yearn for stability, and for that challenge, they tell me, they are prepared.

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The feeling at Tahrir was one of determination, a recognition that the struggle for revolutionary change will take longer. "We are not just fighting an individual now, we are fighting an entrenched military institution and its corrupt allies," said Fadel. "We are ready for the difficulties ahead."

*Post-scriptum :*

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