

Egypt



# Egypt

## Contested Revolution

Philip Marfleet



**PlutoPress**  
[www.plutobooks.com](http://www.plutobooks.com)



First published 2016 by Pluto Press  
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

[www.plutobooks.com](http://www.plutobooks.com)

Copyright © Philip Marfleet 2016

The right of Philip Marfleet to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 3552 0 Hardback  
ISBN 978 0 7453 3551 3 Paperback  
ISBN 978 1 7837 1794 1 PDF eBook  
ISBN 978 1 7837 1796 5 Kindle eBook  
ISBN 978 1 7837 1795 8 EPUB eBook

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England

Simultaneously printed in the European Union and United States of America



# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vi
<i>Glossary</i>	viii
<i>Preface</i>	xii

## PART I: MAKING REVOLUTION

1 Introduction	3
2 The Streets	16
3 The Workers and the Movement	35
4 Crises and Confrontations	54

## PART II: THE PAST IN THE PRESENT

5 Islamism and the State	77
6 Fate of the Left	96

## PART III: COUNTER-REVOLUTION

7 Egypt Under Mursi	117
8 Brotherhood, People, State	134
9 Towards the Coup	154
10 Counter-Revolution and Beyond	175

Postscript – Cairo, April 2016	199
--------------------------------	-----

<i>Notes</i>	205
<i>Bibliography</i>	219
<i>Index</i>	245

# 1

## Introduction

### *Who made Egypt's revolution?*

The events of January and February 2011 brought together powerful institutional actors, most importantly those in authority in the Egyptian state, and a vast number of protestors for whom engagement in public politics was a novel experience. Who participated and what was the nature of their involvement? How did they view their experiences and what were their preferred outcomes? Was this a movement of protest, a project of reform or the start of a 'revolution'?

The scale of popular<sup>1</sup> participation in the uprising that began on 25 January 2011 may be unprecedented in modern history. The numbers involved, and the breadth and depth of the movement, suggest extraordinarily high levels of engagement. State officials, police and army chiefs were stunned by the size and energy of demonstrations: Mona El-Ghobasy describes the impact on security forces as one of 'shock and awe' (2011). In a typical exchange on 28 January between officers of the Amn al-Markazi (Central Security Force [CSF], the riot police), a junior officer in the streets of Alexandria told his commander: 'The situation here is beyond belief. I'm telling you, sir, beyond belief.' The CSF was soon ordered to retreat to protect the city's police stations.<sup>2</sup> There were similar incidents in most Egyptian cities, the speed and scale of events surprising both police and protestors. Ibrahim, an organiser of the initial 25 January protest in Cairo relates his experience:

We agreed to meet at the Journalists' Syndicate downtown. On the morning of 25 January we said if there were 500 of us we'd stay for an hour; if a thousand we'd try to march down the street; if more we'd head for Tahrir [Square]. When we found the street was full we marched anyway, then we found there were people in Ramses Street and Gala'



Street and we heard of thousands coming from Shubra and Bulaq – and we kept moving. We broke into Tahrir from ‘Abd al-Mun‘im Riyad Square. The police ran: what a moment of liberation!<sup>3</sup>

On the night of 25 January, 10,000 riot police cleared Tahrir Square and occupied access streets to ensure that protestors did not return. All over Egypt city centres that had also been occupied by large crowds were assaulted by CSF detachments using tear gas and live ammunition – by morning, a Cairo newspaper reported, ‘some squares looked like a sea of black-clad security officers.’<sup>4</sup> The regime had laid down its challenge: if demonstrators wanted the streets as a stage for their protests, they must redouble their numbers and be prepared to fight. Activists responded by declaring 28 January a ‘Day of Rage’ and government officials ordered a curfew, denying Internet access and closing mobile phone networks. At this point the regime’s strategists seemed to believe assessments of the protests as a ‘Facebook Revolution’. On this view, repeated widely in the European and North American press, the events were organised and led by middle-class youth who were ‘tech-savvy’, their use of electronic networks allowing demonstrators to evade the state’s usual means of surveillance and control, so that without the Internet and telephone networks they could be isolated and protests would peter out.<sup>5</sup> The notion that protests were the work of highly educated young agitators complemented a long-standing theme in regime propaganda – the idea that the government represented the common interests of the people and that opposition came from a small minority that, in the words of President Mubarak, ‘sought to spread chaos and violence’ (2011). As we shall see, networks of activists long engaged in attempts to contest the autocracy played a key role in the protests. Most were not ‘digital revolutionaries’ nor did they possess the influence to initiate events on the scale of protests now under way.

Sameh Naguib, a radical activist and participant in the initial mobilisation on 25 January, comments that suspending the Internet and phone networks had no visible effect, as the vast majority of leaders and organisers did not have access to Facebook and could easily use more traditional forms of communication: rather, he suggests, ‘it emboldened the demonstrators even more by proving the regime was desperate and weak’ (Naguib 2011a: 17). On 28 January, the protest movement

answered the regime's challenge by bringing millions of people to city squares. They came from every sector of urban society: in Cairo demonstrations began at many assembly points, drawing participants from prosperous middle-class suburbs, from traditional working-class neighbourhoods and from 'popular quarters' in both inner areas, and from the swathes of informal housing of the *'ashwa'iyyat* that surround the city.<sup>6</sup>

Hussein, a campaigner with long experience in the democracy movement, describes the impact in his suburban area south of Cairo:

We started off in Ma'adi with a few hundred people. We were all tense and fearful – we knew that anything could happen. As we marched towards the city centre the demonstration grew and grew – but when we got to Dar al-Salam [an 'informal' area] it increased hugely. It seemed as if the whole area was joining in. People left their jobs, students left schools, at each road junction the march swelled and swelled. I'd estimate that at least 40,000 people joined in as we passed through Dar al-Salam – and then more and more as we moved on towards Tahrir through the other poor areas south of the centre.<sup>7</sup>

This picture is confirmed by Marwa, in her account of a march from the middle-class suburb of Medinet Nasr, east of the city centre:

When we began in Medinet Nasr it was all a gamble. The government had ordered all mobile networks and the Internet to be shut down, so we were calling people to join us by every means. As we headed into the city people came from everywhere – but when we got near the popular quarters an army of people joined us. That was crucial because at Ramses Square the Amn al-Markazi [CSF] put up a serious fight. We beat them, taking many casualties. An unarmed crowd broke through against trained, armed police! In the end we simply exhausted them – they fell back and we poured through. It was all about numbers – a people's insurrection.<sup>8</sup>

By evening, and despite many casualties, Tahrir Square had been secured by demonstrators who were not to leave for many weeks. The pattern was repeated nationwide, especially in cities with large working-class populations. In Port Said, with a population of 600,000, some 80,000 people were said to be on the streets, with demonstrations of comparable

proportions in Alexandria, Suez, Damietta and Mansoura (Beaumont and Sherwood 2011). In Suez, *Al Jazeera* reported, ‘The police have been quite comprehensively defeated by the power of the people’ (Beaumont and Sherwood 2011).

Demonstrators overwhelmed the CSF: they were in effect the shock troops of the movement for change, representing above all Egypt’s urban working class and poor. Only in the countryside was participation significantly more modest – and even here many small towns saw protests. Police disappeared from the streets in most cities to be replaced by troops who remained passive, fraternising with the crowds.

What distinguished the movement of January 2011 from earlier protests against the regimes of Mubarak and his predecessor Anwar Sadat was the sheer scale of popular engagement. In this first phase of the uprising the CSF proved inadequate to resist a movement that had mobilised nationwide, paralysing the security agencies. Apparently shaken by the protests, the regime hesitated to order a military offensive, sending troops to the streets ostensibly as guardians of the people – a development that was to have profound long-term implications (see Chapter 4). On 31 January, some 2 million people rallied in Tahrir Square, a million in Martyrs’ Square in Alexandria, 750,000 in Mansoura and some 250,000 in Suez – numbers that dwarfed all previous political mobilisations in Egypt (Naguib 2011a: 19). Increasingly desperate, the regime released from its jails thousands of convicted prisoners whom officers directed to join with plain-clothes police and gangs of paid thugs – the *baltagiyya* – in attacks on demonstrators.<sup>9</sup> Soha Abdelaty, deputy director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, which had for years monitored conditions in Egyptian prisons, noted: ‘clear instructions from the Interior Ministry, specifically its central Prisons Department, to instigate some sort of chaos’ (Abouzeid 2011). In a series of savage confrontations, notably during the ‘Battle of the Camel’ in Cairo on 2 February 2011, gangs together with plain-clothes police failed to see off protestors. As Tahrir Square and other city centres became, for the first time, zones for open political expression the number of participants grew exponentially. The barrier of fear upon which autocracy had depended for decades had been breached. El-Ghobashy comments:

Mubarak’s structures of dominion were thought to be foolproof, and for 30 years they were. What shifted the balance away from the regime

were four continuous days of street fighting, January 25–28, that pitted the people against police all over the country. That battle converted a familiar, predictable episode into a revolutionary situation.

(El-Ghobashy 2011)

### *Streets and workers*

A striking feature of the events was the increasing involvement of working-class people. Media coverage of the protests, especially outside Egypt, focused upon middle-class youth – the ‘Facebook generation’. According to the *New York Times*, the key role in the protests was played by young professionals, mostly doctors and lawyers who, ‘wired and shrewd’, were said to have touched off and then guided the revolt (Kirkpatrick 2011a). Often available for interview in European languages, these activists became the voices and faces of Tahrir on transnational media. Presented as ‘a generation changing the world’ (*Time* 2001), they were in fact a small minority of participants. Most of those consistently in the streets and in the front line of confrontations with police and the *baltagiyya* were manual and clerical workers, and people from poor families with part-time employment or without regular jobs. Alexander and Bassiouny (2014: 198) note the preponderance of working-class victims among those killed in battles with police and thugs during the January demonstrations in Cairo, and the concentration of deaths among people from the poorest areas of the city. As we shall see (Chapter 2), Egypt’s workers and urban poor had a pressing interest in both political and social change, their deepening involvement in the uprising shaping its most radical agendas.

On 6 February, the movement of the streets was complemented by a movement of the workplaces, as mass strikes began in Cairo and cities of the Nile Delta. The key demands of the streets had been formulated on 25 January. In Tahrir they were agreed at an open meeting in the square, quickly organised by activists who rushed to copy centres to make tens of thousands of leaflets for distribution among people flooding to the city centre.<sup>10</sup> These called for the removal of Mubarak; an end to the Emergency Law; freedom; justice; a new non-military government representing the interests of the people; and ‘efficient’ (non-corrupt) mobilisation of Egypt’s resources. As the movement swept Egypt debates entered every workplace, generalising the demands of the streets and

adding to them or reformulating them in the context of collective discussion and experience. Mass strikes began, initially among transport workers, health workers, refuse collectors, postal workers, textile workers, steel workers and workers in a range of occupations on the Suez Canal. They called for better pay and job security; many also raised demands for *tathir* ('cleansing'/ 'purification') of corrupt or autocratic owners and managers. Some strikers – initially a minority – engaged directly with protestors in city squares. In Cairo, representatives of workers in the Public Transport Authority went to Tahrir Square to distribute leaflets announcing their decision. There was no co-ordinating centre, however, and no formal relationship among activists in these workplaces. Rather, the strike movement grew organically as part of an uprising in which millions of people were experiencing a surge of confidence in their ability to bring about change.

On 10 February, public transport workers in Cairo closed bus garages, making a demonstrative impact upon the whole city. Strikes spread nationwide, from Alexandria in the north to Aswan in the far south. Some 300,000 workers were now involved, including large numbers in strategically important sectors: in a further significant development, strikes affected military factories under the authority of the armed forces command. On 11 February, demonstrations were on an unprecedented scale: among Egypt's population of some 80 million, over 15 million were said to be on the streets, including many on the brink of further collective action across industry (Naguib 2011a: 27). These developments marked a turning point and in an address delivered on state television Vice-President Omar Suleiman announced abruptly that Mubarak had resigned, passing his authority as head of state to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF).

On the psychological and symbolic level, observed Fawaz Gerges, this was 'a shattering moment' (Petersen 2011). Mubarak – 'the public face of political authoritarianism in the Arab world' – and architect of one of its most feared security machines, had fallen to an unarmed mass movement (Petersen 2011). Amid jubilation, the movement now passed through an important phase. It became broader, deeper and more radical in aspiration and in action; at the same time, some of its early supporters began to express their anxieties and their wish to contain the agenda for change.

Creative activity filled streets the people now claimed as their own. Participants in the ‘18 Days’ of protest in Tahrir (between 25 January and 11 February) describe a festive atmosphere, even during bitter fighting with police and armed gangs. For Keraitim and Mehrez, Tahrir had ‘acquired a symbolic life of its own that [became] the sign and language of an ongoing revolution’ (2012: 28). In the carnivalesque atmosphere of the Square, they identify traditions of the *mulid*, a popular festival celebrated in Egypt for centuries and familiar to the mass of the population, especially to the working class, urban poor and peasantry, as a rare opportunity for self-expression vis-à-vis the suffocating power of the state (see Chapter 2).<sup>11</sup> The square had become a stage for song, poetry, dance and theatre; on buildings nearby popular artists commented on events with graffiti and paintings. When after early confrontations city centres became safer, children attended in huge numbers. Swing parks appeared, together with stalls selling toys and sweets usually associated with the holiday atmosphere of Eid<sup>12</sup> or with the *mulid*.

This surge in confidence was expressed in all manner of collective actions. During the most bloody confrontations of January and in the context of pervasive threats from plain-clothes police, the *baltagiyya* and prisoners freed by the regime to join the gangs, neighbourhood committees were established widely to ensure local security. El-Meehy quotes a founding member of a group in a poor neighbourhood of Cairo: ‘Committees were everywhere in villages and cities. They became the heartbeat of Egyptian society – locally rooted and flexibly organized, informal and voluntary’ (2012). Although their experiences were to prove uneven, these groups played an important role in transmitting the collective confidence of city squares into local communities. Of most lasting significance, however, was a further intensive burst of strike action affecting industry, transport and services, and embracing historic centres of labour struggle such as the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company in the Delta city of Mehalla al-Kubra, Egypt’s largest workplace with some 25,000 employees. Campaigning journalist Hossam El-Hamalawy observed that the fall of Mubarak had been associated directly with entry into the mass movement of organised labour:

Mubarak managed to alienate all social classes in society. In Tahrir Square, you found sons and daughters of the Egyptian elite, together with the workers, middle-class citizens and the urban poor. But

remember that it's only when the mass strikes started [...] that the regime started crumbling and the army had to force Mubarak to resign because the system was about to collapse.

(El-Hamalawy 2011a)

Workers had been emboldened by the overthrow of Mubarak, said El-Hamalawy, and they were 'not going home anytime soon' (El-Hamalawy 2011a). Mehalla workers now demanded a minimum monthly wage of LE1,200 (some \$215) and the removal of the company's chief executive, Fuad al-Alim, widely viewed as being part of the Mubarak regime's nepotistic networks. One worker representative told *Al-Ahram*: 'Corruption at Misr [Spinning and Weaving Company] mirrors the corruption within the country. The plant is a microcosm of what has happened across Egypt' (Rady 2011). Similar demands were raised in another historic centre of labour struggles, the Egyptian Iron and Steel Company in Helwan south of Cairo, and at banks, cement works, chemical and pharmaceutical plants, transport depots and transport hubs including Cairo airport. During February there were 489 strikes (Beinin 2012: 8), many calling for improved wages and conditions and demanding removal of public sector managers appointed by the regime or private sector owners alleged to have obtained their companies by illicit means. In a new development, some workers – notably a large group at the Mehalla mill – declared that they would disaffiliate from the state-controlled Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) and join the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU), set up only days earlier (Shahid 2011). If the epicentre of the movement had been in city centres, it now moved to industrial zones and to sites of strategic importance for the state itself, notably to transportation depots, military factories and to the Suez Canal. On 19 February 2011, 40 workers' leaders and labour activists associated with EFITU met to adopt a statement on 'Demands of the Workers in the Revolution'. They declared for 'Revolution, Freedom, Social Justice':

O heroes of the 25 January revolution! We, workers and trade unionists from different workplaces which have seen strikes, occupations and demonstrations by hundreds of thousands of workers across Egypt during the current period, feel it is right to unite the demands of striking workers that they may become an integral part of the goals

of our revolution, which the people of Egypt made, and for which the martyrs shed their blood.

(Abu-Eita *et al.* 2011)

Activists from a range of industries, including military factories, identified a ‘social aspect of this revolution’ and their determination ‘to prevent the revolution being taken away from those at its base who should be its beneficiaries’ (Egyptian workers’ declaration 2011). Their demands included the right to form independent unions, the right to strike, the introduction of a minimum wage and a maximum wage, and a call to dissolve the state-controlled union federation ETUF. They asserted,

It is our opinion that if this revolution does not lead to the fair distribution of wealth it is not worth anything. Freedoms are not complete without social freedoms. The right to vote is naturally dependent on the right to a loaf of bread.

(Abu-Eita *et al.* 2011)

### *Broader and deeper*

These workers, and thousands who surged into the independent unions, saw the movement of January and February as means of securing ‘social freedoms’ as well as political reforms guaranteeing basic rights. The aspiration for fundamental change was unmistakable.

A discourse of ‘revolution’ – *thawra* – was pervasive. Most participants in demonstrations, rallies and city centre occupations viewed the movement itself as *al-thawra* and their involvement as *thawri* – ‘revolutionary’ – a means to end autocracy, remove the regime and to bring further change. This was asserted continuously in slogans such as ‘*thawra, thawra, thawra*’ and ‘*thawra hatta’l nasr!*’ (‘Revolution until victory!’). Young activists, workers and urban poor were initiators of the uprising and its most energetic and expectant agents, identified by Carapico as: ‘Diverse, raucous forces [that] appropriated public civic realms and proclaimed ownership of the commons, making ‘a kind of civic revolution’ (Carapico 2012: 221). The novelist Ahdaf Soueif spoke for many who, for the first time, experienced the power of a mass movement and the possibility of achieving further radical change. ‘Beware of caution and embrace the unknown; we’re in a revolution’,



she wrote, 'Put aside calculations and hold onto the dream; we're in a revolution' (Soueif 2012: 191).

During the 18 Days, the movement appeared unified around demands for the removal of Mubarak and his regime. Researchers at The American University in Cairo filmed hours of demonstrations in and around Tahrir Square; they also collected notices, leaflets and statements, together with images of posters, banners and graffiti. These expressive tools were used by participants: 'as a means of responding to and challenging dominant narratives, relating to one another and galvanizing support'; they reflected: 'conscious participation in a specific culture of resistance', making the aims of the revolution 'an ever-present, explicit call for action' (Gibbon and Hawas 2012: 104). Initially, a few hastily made banners called for 'Bread, liberty and human dignity' ('*aysh, huriyya, karama insaniyya*'). As protests developed, a mass of placards and notices appeared, many directed to Mubarak: 'Go [leave/get out]' ('*irhal*'). Others called for 'true reform'; an end to corruption; freedom for political prisoners; trials for Mubarak and his family; revenge for the martyrs (*shuhuda* – those killed by police and gangs during the protests); and for an end to the regime: 'The people want [will/intend] the fall of the regime' ('*al-sha'ab yurid isqat al-nizam*') (Gibbon and Hawas 2012: 103–42).

These expectations of change were not shared by all those who entered the streets, however. As the movement grew, it also attracted people with different understandings of 'revolutionary' change, notably members of the middle class with grievances vis-à-vis the autocracy but who, with a stake in the status quo, were less intent on securing the social freedoms embraced by many workers and the urban poor. When the president fell on 11 February celebrations attracted every established political current, including Islamist, liberal and nationalist parties with histories that reached back to the colonial period and which had at various points been represented in government, including under Mubarak. One outcome, given added meaning by the presence of the army in the streets, was an expression of national unity, evident in the proliferation of Egyptian flags and of slogans celebrating Egyptian identity. In this context, 'revolution' could be identified with traditions of nationalist resistance vis-à-vis the colonial powers of the past and with historic interventions of the armed forces in the name of the people. Shokr comments that 'liberation' took on more complex meanings, including those associated with patriotism and what he calls 'a jubilee of national pride' (2011 45).