

# ORSAM REVIEW OF REGIONAL AFFAIRS

NO.21, FEBRUARY 2015



## REVOLUTION AND COUNTER-REVOLUTION IN EGYPT: RETURN TO THE SQUARE ONE?

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The revolutionary process started on 25 January 2011 in Egypt features the most of the characteristics of a 'modern' revolution by following a path with ups and downs. The Egyptian military, which exerted its authority in the first stage of the power struggle after Mohammad Morsi was removed from the office, could not stand up to the resistance of civil actors, and gave approval to hold the democratic elections. Muslim Brotherhood led by Mohammad Morsi seized the control. This development disturbed both revolutionist and regional and global actors, so the counter-revolution process was initiated by them through a military intervention. The ongoing repressive policies of the Sisi regime towards revolutionary actors indicate a return to the starting point. Nevertheless, the existence of many factors which caused the revolution before 2011 is the biggest obstacle in sustaining the counter-revolution. From this point of view, it can be said that the revolutionary process in Egypt is continuing despite the counter-revolution attempt.

On 26<sup>th</sup> January 2015, the day after the fourth anniversary of 25<sup>th</sup> January Revolution, Egyptian court lifted the prison sentences of the Mubarak family. Many people pessimistically and timidly define and mention the question of ‘whether the revolution was ended’. At least, we face this question as a legitimate query. This concern is partly right, but people who suggest that the revolution has not ended yet have legitimate reasons. Thus, almost all socio-economic reasons that caused the Egyptian Revolution have remained robust.

For this reason, it would be an unfair assessment to argue that the Egyptian Revolution process may have ended. Here, the word ‘process’ was selected in particular, because almost every analyst who conduct studies on revolutions know well that revolutions do not belong to any moment. The stages of revolution can correspond to different

moments. So, revolution is the process that occurs by the formation of all of these “revolutionary moments”. Counter-revolution has been one of the most common revolutionary stages since the French Revolution. For many years, historians could only agree with the starting day of the French Revolution that was July 14, 1789. Following years of struggle and fighting were considered as part of the counter-revolutionary attempt which lasted at least in 10 years. The reign of “terror” after the French Revolution represents a similar account for what is happening in Egypt today.

When viewed from this aspect, the uprising started on 25 January 2011 is accepted as the first day of the Egyptian Revolution by many people, especially by the actors of the revolution. Apart from a minor faction who supported the July 3<sup>rd</sup> 2013 Egyptian coup, almost everyone, however, think that the revolutionary

process is still continuing. It should be stated that ‘used liberal revolutionary’ actors who had supported the 30 June demonstrations against Mohammad Morsi and the 3 July military coup led by Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, but faced the repulsive slap of the military regime as Muslim Brothers had to face can be added to this majority. By sticking to this background and considering both the reasons caused the revolution and current situation, the analysis of the Egyptian Revolution’s four year long process is the main goal of this work.

## **Road to Revolt and Revolutionary Uprising**

Although the Egyptian Revolution ignited on 25 January 2011, the reasons of the uprising went back to several years ago. The worker’s strike in Al-Mahalla Al-Kubra on 6 April 2008 initiated a serious revolutionary wave. Thus, there occurred 1.500 strikes, work

stoppages and worker protests in that year and following three years toward the revolution.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the momentum gained by the protest movements, it was the last straw that a young man, Khaled Said, was beaten to death by police officers in Alexandria. This brutal act of the Egyptian police further motivated the Egyptian revolutionary movement and they commenced their protests on 25 January 2011.

Many non-governmental organisations, especially April 6 Youth Movement, called Egyptians onto the streets on 25 January, the National Police Day. Initially, this call was an abstaining invitation, and it was underestimated by the regime. In the following days, harsh police response and the increasing anger of the protestors expanded the protests. After Hosni Mubarak disabled the internet access in order to weaken the communication ability of protestors, they came to the point

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of no return. After then, the protestors demanded the regime change by coming to the squares increasingly. The protests which spread to many cities such as Cairo, Suez, Ismailia and Alexandria succeeded to topple Hosni Mubarak's 30 year long regime on 11 February 2011.

### **Power Struggle in Post-Revolution Period**

Following Hosni Mubarak's removal from the office, Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) took the power to govern Egypt. The revolutionary actors who

complied with the situation at the first stage wanted SCAF to oversee the transition process rapidly, and ensure the transfer of power to a civilian government. However, military administration came out against these demands and refused to hand over the power to the revolutionary actors. One of the main reasons of such stance of the Egyptian military is that the army did not want to lose its advantages, especially in the field of economy.

The 'privileged' position of the army in Egyptian politics after the Free Officers Coup in 1952 has continued

in various forms under the rule of Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak until today. The army adopted itself to the neoliberal policies followed by Mubarak regime, maximised its profit and made contributions to the national economy in different ways with the help of low tax rates, low-cost labour and financial privileges provided by the regime. While economic activities of the army enabled generals to command a significant share of the economy, these activities played a vital role for the regime to remain in power, and they also functioned in creating jobs, contributing to production and providing the social works. The activities of the army, which serves the market economy in one way or another, inevitably paved the way for being effective in business world. Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak were successful at maintaining their grip on power while establishing strong network with

business activities run by the Egyptian Armed Forces.

The reluctance of the army in transferring the power to the civil actors in post-revolution period is due to its effective role in the fields of economy and politics. Following the revolution, the Generals tried to preserve their privileged position in power struggle in order to preserve their privileges such as their favoured positions in expropriations, exemption from taxes, and billion-dollar public procurements. Nevertheless, other actors, who aimed to seize the power, utilized the momentum generated by the revolution in their favour. These actors also took their parts in the power struggle by being insistent on the transfer of power to a civilian government with the purpose of diminishing the army's influence in political life.

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Brotherhood and Salafis followed the 25 January demonstrations in silence but then entered the revolutionary process to have a share in the post-revolutionary government. When the actors, especially liberal revolutionists, who wanted the regime to break down, stepped up pressure for pushing SCAF to be impetuous in holding the election, the army caused the deaths of tens of demonstrators during the Maspero and Mohammed Mahmud incidents, so these deaths increased the violence in post-revolutionary period.

After these horrific incidents, it was agreed that the parliamentary election would be held in November 2011, and the presidential election would be held in June 2012. The ballot was casted for parliamentary election on 28 November and was completed in January. Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) became the group that held the highest number of

seats. Al-Nour Party representing Salafist movement was on the second rank, and both of these parties held 70% of parliamentary seats. Liberal and secular revolutionist groups who were prominent actors during 25 January Revolution became unhappy due to the results of the election. Having organisational problems and being destitute of social support, revolutionist actors endeavoured to have a share in the government until presidential election, although they could not reach any success in parliamentary election.

### **Growing Hope for Democracy: The Term of Morsi**

The presidential election which was held with the purpose of diminishing the army's political effectiveness completely appeared like a struggle between revolutionist actors and former regime supporters. Thus, Islamic parties and liberal

revolutionists who could not compromise on a certain candidate during the first round, decided to take joint action in the second round, because Ahmed Shafik who was one of the most influential person and a former Mubarak-era Prime Minister run for presidency against Muslim Brotherhood's candidate Muhammad Morsi. These actors supported Muhammad Morsi altogether since they know that the possible presidency of Shafik makes this revolution to be an incomplete attempt. As a result, Muslim Brotherhood's candidate Muhammad Morsi won the election in slightly ahead of his rival Ahmed Shafik, and became the first president of the post-revolution period in Egypt. Egypt's first democratically elected president Morsi's accession to power was seen as a success of the revolution by all groups and was evaluated as an important step to establish democracy. Before and after the election Morsi emphasized

that he would include all political groups into government positions, and he promised the revolutionaries that they will be included as well.

While Muhammad Morsi was maintaining a close relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood Movement, revolutionist groups criticised him for broking his words and betraying the revolution. However, it could be observed that Muhammad Morsi aimed to integrate people from all stratas of the society into both the formation of the cabinet and designation of constitutional committee. Only 5 out of 36 members of the cabinet, including Hesham Qandil, who was appointed as the Prime Minister, were affiliated to Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>2</sup> In fact, number of ministers were already appointed by SCAF after the revolution and they served during the SCAF's rule. Additionally, revolutionary activists and Coptic Christians took part in constitutional

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review committee, but they left the committee due to their inactive role and limited number. As the struggle among revolutionary groups was continuing, Mohammad Morsi fought against the attempts of former regime supporters in jurisdiction and bureaucracy to inhibit 'democratic process'.

In addition to the developments such as the dissolution of the parliament by jurisdiction, the end of former regime supporters' trial in acquittal, the rejection of judges to oversee the constitution referendum, and abstention of security forces in restoring order that may hinder the executive power also left Morsi in a difficult

situation. In order to prevent the attempts that posed a threat to the democratization process, Mohammad Morsi took various decisions. Even though Morsi tried to keep democratic process continuing, the revolutionist actors found the content of his decisions as 'autocratic' initiatives. In the following period, anti-Morsi sentiments became widespread in opposition circles and they aimed to terminate Morsi's term in power.

The country slid into chaos due to the reasons such as the increasing number of protests throughout the country, complete loss of function of police in providing security, and the



spread of reaction against Morsi administration among large masses by the help of petrol and electricity crisis orchestrated by the actors of the former regime. Gradually expanding anti-Ikhwan coalition rejected all calls and consensus proposals of Morsi, and planned a coup that would remove Morsi from the office by receiving support from external actors. Within this period, many revolutionist groups such as April 6 Youth Movement and Revolutionary Socialists together with prominent activists, including Ahmed Maher, Ahmed Duma, Alaa Abdel Fattah and Mahienour El-Masry, and the figures like Mohamed El Baradei were used by anti-Ikhwan coalition.<sup>3</sup> Tamarod Movement which established in April and was supported by former regime's actors launched the petition calling on Morsi's resignation. With the intense support of the media organisations owned by Mubarak-era actors, the petition

contributed to the anti-Morsi demonstrations on 30 June by encouraging high level of participation. Following the widespread protests and demonstrations, on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2013, Chief of the Egyptian Armed Forces Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi announced that the army seized power. The first democratically elected President Mohammad Morsi was deposed by a military coup.

### **The Counter-revolution and Back to Square One: Military Coup D'état**

It was realized that the real aim of the military coup led by Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi was greater than only toppling Morsi. The main purpose of the coup was to initiate a counter-revolution in order to terminate the revolution process that started on 25 January 2011. The major force in this coalition was the Mubarak-era businessmen, bureaucrats and judges who benefited from the privileges of the past regime to

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a large extent. Furthermore, Coptic community, secular revolutionary movements, Sufi groups known with their powerful position in the management of Al Azhar and anti-Muslim Brotherhood attitudes, and Salafi al-Nour Party which is the defender of the Saudi Arabia's interests in the country constitutes the main body of the counter-revolution process.

The coalition composed of abovementioned domestic and some external actors whose interests were damaged because of the 25 January Revolution, had limited support of social base. This coalition aimed to give the

army a ground to legitimize the coup by organizing 30 June demonstrations. The coalition which achieved this plan by the help of the media completed its mission after the military coup d'état on 3<sup>rd</sup> of June, and the army led by Al-Sisi became the dominant actor in the counter-revolution process. While there were poor reactions from Western capitals against the removal of a democratically elected president with a military coup, the King Abdallah of Saudi Arabia, sent a congratulatory message to Al-Sisi. United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia which had



remained unresponsive to the calls for economic aid to Egypt in Morsi-era pledged to give financial support to Egypt, and announced that they will make contribution to the coup for its success.

The counter-revolution which gained momentum following the coup led by Al-Sisi aimed to politically exterminate Muslim Brotherhood movement which had seized power in post-revolution period. Sisi government took a harsh stance on the Ikhwan Movement by pressuring the group politically. Opposing the coup d'état, pro-democratic groups who gathered at Rabaa and al-Nahda Squares to stage peaceful demonstrations came under violent attacks by the army on 14 August. For the first time in its history, the army killed its citizens in mass and systemically in Egypt. In the course of these incidents, over 2.000 people lost their lives. This move of the army was a turning point, and a campaign was

mounted to arrest the high ranks of Ikhwan and its supports in the following period. After a while, thousands of Muslim Brotherhood members were arrested and put in prison, and were kept in prison although they did not receive any sentence. Egyptian courts at the military tutelage's command declared Muslim Brotherhood Movement a 'terrorist organisation' in spite of its social services for many years. Nevertheless, anti-coup protests did not end, and demonstrations were organized against Al-Sisi government, especially with the participation of university students.

Another component of the counter-revolution process is the elimination of revolutionary activists who came to the forefront during the 25<sup>th</sup> January Revolution, but had taken a different position in June 30 demonstrations by giving their support to the army. These revolutionary groups became counter-revolutionaries by

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supporting the July 3<sup>rd</sup> coup. However, in the aftermath of the coup, these activists realized that the military regime was using them to legitimate the counter-revolutionary process. They further realized that the gains of the revolution were under threat because of the oppressive attitude of the military. Many anti-Ikhwan activists such as Ahmed Maher, Ahmed Duma, Alaa Abdel Fattah and Mahienour El-Massry were arrested and imprisoned by the military government. Furthermore, some of these activists were put on trial and sentenced, because they participated in anti-SCAF demonstrations in the period of post-25 January Revolution. In other words, their activities in the process of the revolution were considered as a 'crime factor' for activists. Similarly, April 6 Youth Movement which was one of the symbol groups of 25 January Revolution, was banned, and their activities were suspended by the Sisi regime. The regime

went even further and wanted the movement to be declared a 'terrorist organization', so the government initiated the judicial procedure.<sup>4</sup>

The military regime also distanced itself from the Tamarod Movement which was the main actor in the anti-Morsi demonstrations on 30 June. The group initiated to form a political party but the court refused the application. Exclusion of Tamarod Movement which supported the army in the coup process was an indication that the group was used as an instrument in the counter-revolution process, and the Sisi regime did not need them further in the post-coup period. In another words, following completion of its mission the Tamarod was no longer needed by the military.<sup>5</sup>

Most researchers and analysts agree that the coup on 3 July 2013 was a counter-revolution initiative to exterminate the 25 January Revolution. This process has more

than one step. Most important stage of the counter-revolution is making Muslim Brotherhood movement dysfunctional by weakening its social and political position. In fact, pursuing an oppressive policy towards Muslim Brotherhood in both Egypt and other regional countries is the indicator that Ikhwan is seen as the biggest threat by some groups. Developments such as the declaration of Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization by the United Arab Emirates, the pressure of Saudi Arabia on Qatar and the ban imposed by Kuwaiti regime on NGOs which have links with Ikhwan are the most explicit indicators of this situation.

While Al-Sisi administration eliminates the prominent actors of 25 January Revolution systemically, it also assists Mubarak-era figures to come into power again. As part of this strategy, in October 2014 Hosni Mubarak and his two sons, Gamal and Alaa, were acquitted of many charges.

On 26 January 2015 all of Mubarak family members were released from jail, marking the fourth anniversary of the 25 January Revolution with despair and failure.<sup>6</sup> After the recent developments, many analysts in Egypt commented that the country returned to the starting point in the light of repressive policy implemented by the Sisi regime.

### **Possibility of Another Revolutionary Wave?**

In comparison to many examples in history of revolution research, there is no reason to say that the uprising in Egypt is not a revolution. First of all, it is known that socio-economic problems lie at the bottom of the uprising. As Gilbert Achcar elaborated successfully, all factors were in existence for a social explosion on the long road to revolution, especially on the eve of 2011.<sup>7</sup> The problems at the level of the society caused by inequality in income distribution,

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non-availability of social security system, high level of unemployment, poor working conditions, insufficient municipal and urban services, and the corruption of executive elites indicated the existence of pre-revolution conditions in Egypt. In addition to socio-economic circumstances, following reasons were also at the heart of the revolutionary uprising: repressive policies implemented by the regime towards social groups, ignorance of rule of law, hampering political participation, increase in police violence and the maladministration.

At this point, it can be seen that the reasons caused the 25 January Revolution are still in existence in Egypt under the rule of Sisi. Since the military coup in July 2013, unemployment increased because of the decreasing number in tourism sector. Furthermore, international investment rates, health, education and infrastructure services did not improve and municipal services became even worse during the regime of Sisi. Because of these reasons, socio-economic problems reached at the highest level. Sisi administration cut or



suspended the government promotions for basic foods and energy products such as petroleum. In parallel with this, purchasing-power declined together with soaring inflation. These developments made the life conditions much more difficult for low-incomers.

In addition to economic problems, repressive policies carried out by Sisi regime also contributed to growing discontent among the opponents in the counter-revolutionary period. Many groups believe that the only aim of the Sisi regime is to exterminate the revolutionary process

which was made with the purpose of toppling the 30 year long autocratic regime in 2011. Being a generation experienced the revolution, Egyptian youth is continuing anti-coup demonstrations in spite of repression and violence. This situation is a remarkable indicator that the revolution process has not ended yet. The determination of this generation which rejects the Sisi regime, and continues peaceful demonstrations for democratic, liberal, and pluralistic government is the major obstacle to counter-revolution initiative in Egypt.

Egyptian youth is continuing anti-coup demonstrations in spite of repression and violence.

## Endnotes

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- 2 Ahram Online, 'Meet Hisham Qandil's new Egypt cabinet', 2 August 2014; The Brothers of the Cabinet, Daily News Egypt, 10 August 2012.
- 3 Several activists, who are leading figure in 25 January Revolution, were arrested after the coup led by Abdel Fattah al Sisi. In fact, 6 April Movement, which initiated revolutionary protests, declared as "terrorist organization". Mohamed El Baradei later stated that he was "used as a screen" by pro-coup forces. 'Beni perde olarak kullandılar', Al-Jazeera Turk, 27 January 2015.
- 4 Daily News Egypt, 'Court to Rule on Designating 6 April as "Terrorist Organisation"', 27 January 2015.
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- 6 Mısır Bülteni, 'Devrimin 4. Yılında Hapiste "Mübarek" Kalmadı', 26 January 2015.
- 7 Gilbert Achcar, Halk İstiyor (Arap İsyanı Üzerine Radikal Bir İnceleme), İstanbul, Ayrıntı Yayınları, 2014.

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