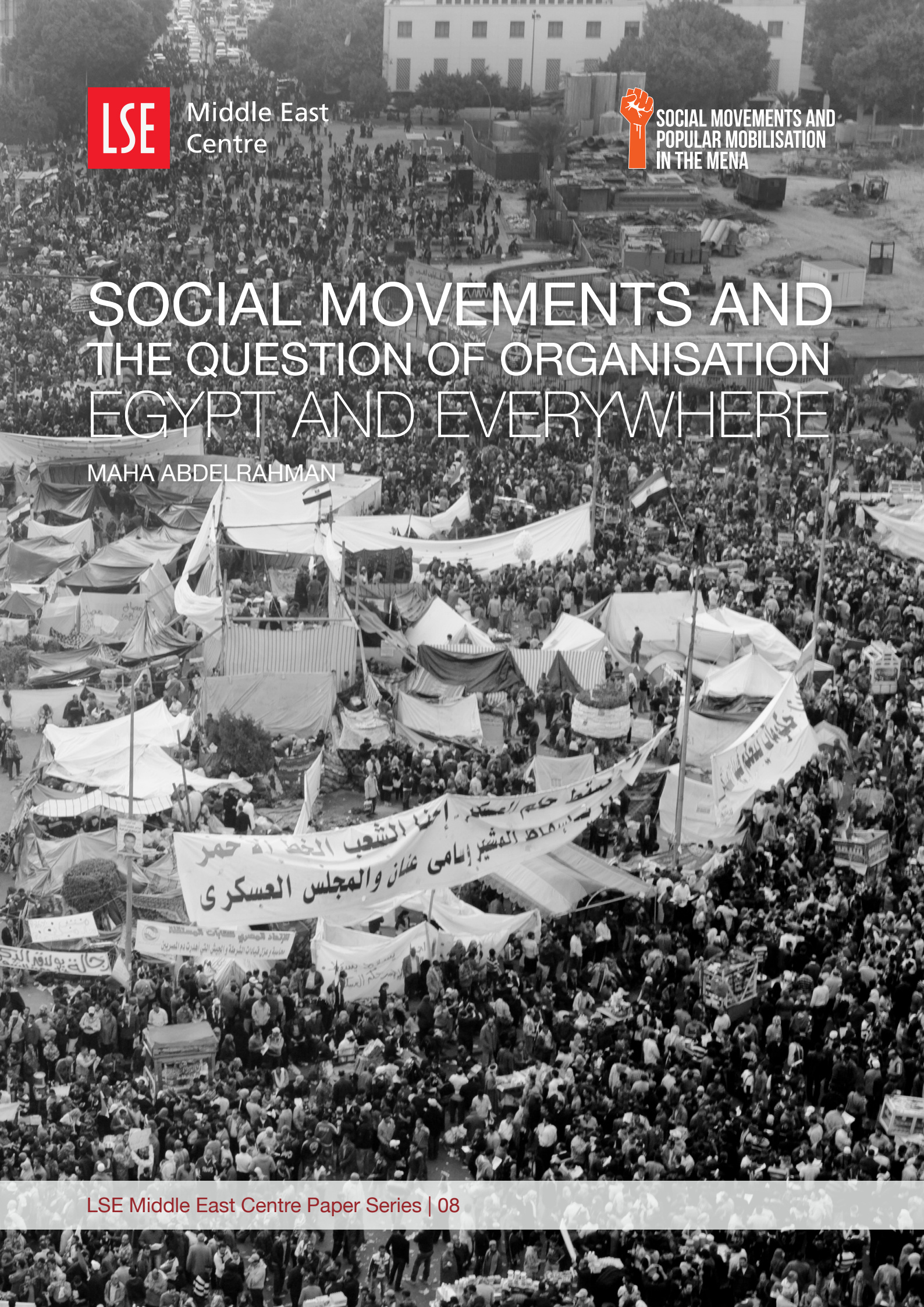
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SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND POPULAR MOBILISATION IN THE MENA
SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND
THE QUESTION OF ORGANISATION
EGYPT AND EVERYWHERE
MAHA ABDELRAHMAN
LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series | 08

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SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND POPULAR MOBILISATION IN THE MENA

# SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE QUESTION OF ORGANISATION: EGYPT AND EVERYWHERE

Maha Abdelrahman

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## About the Author

Maha Abdelrahman is a Reader in the Centre of Development Studies at the University of Cambridge. Her research interests cover a wide range of aspects of the sociology and politics of development including state-civil society relations, opposition politics and social movements, labour relations and NGOs - both at the global level and within the context of the Middle East. Her current research focuses on the politics of the 'Arab Spring', the history of social and political struggles in the Arab Middle East and the meaning of revolution in the 21st century. Her recent book *Egypt's Long Revolution: Protests and Uprisings* (Routledge 2015) deals with many of these issues.

# Abstract

This paper considers the nature of activism and revolutionary process in the 21st century by examining some of the dilemmas involved in the case of Egypt. It argues that the characteristics of horizontal networks of activism, especially the absence of centralised organisational structures, although well suited to the phase of mass protests in the lead-up to the ousting of Mubarak, can pose a challenge to the prospects of long-term revolutionary projects.

## Introduction

The protest against police brutality on the 'day of anger', 25 January 2011, which developed into a nation-wide uprising that ended with the ousting of Mubarak, was the culmination of a long struggle which had mobilised millions of Egyptians across class, age and gender lines for over a decade. Since 2000, a myriad of informal political groups, activist forums, political coalitions and protest activities have altered the face of Egyptian opposition politics and mobilised wide sections of the population. They benefited from the experience of an embryonic civil society which emerged in the years before and constituted NGOs, political parties and networks such as the Al-Nadeem Centre for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence, the Hisham Mubarak Law Centre (HMLC), Al-Karama Party and the Revolutionary Socialists Group, among others. Critical analysis of these protests has often examined them within a framework of horizontal networks under authoritarian regimes.[1] The study of protests within this framework emphasises a number of features which sets them apart from earlier forms of social movements including decentralised, loose organisational structures, rejection of traditional leadership and interchangeable membership between different groups. This paper examines the dilemmas that groups and members of protest movements and activist networks working on these principles face when the context in which they operate is dramatically changed, particularly in the aftermath of major uprisings. The case of Egypt is pertinent in helping us address the question of how some features of horizontal networks have posed a challenge for their members and the millions they had mobilised in the aftermath of Mubarak's downfall, and in explaining the ease with which counter revolutionary forces have been able to subvert the work of these millions towards a more radical project of transformation. I will focus on one main characteristic of these networks in this regard; namely, their loose organisational structures.

The celebration of new social movements (NSMs) as horizontal networks needing no leader, capable of organising without a central authority and based on a diffuse notion of power derives from a feature that sets them apart from 'old' social movements: their political objective is not to capture the state. In revisiting his earlier analysis of antisystemic movements, Wallerstein emphasises deep suspicion of the state and state-oriented action as a defining feature of NSMs.[2]

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[1] Ziad Munson, 'Islamic Mobilization: Social Movement Theory and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood', *The Sociological Quarterly* 42/4 (2001), pp. 487-510. Maha Abdelrahman, 'With the Islamists? Sometimes…With the State? Never!', *British Journal of Middle East Studies* 36/1 (2009), pp. 37-54. Rabab El-Mahdi, 'Enough! Egypt's Quest for Democracy', *Comparative Political Studies* 42/8 (2009), pp.1011-1039. Maha Abdelrahman, 'The Transnational and the Local: Egyptian Activists and Transnational Protest Networks', *British Journal of Middle East Studies* 38/3 (2011), pp. 407-424. Joel Beinin, 'A Workers' Social Movement on the Margin of the Global Neoliberal Order, Egypt 2004-2009' in Joel Beinin and Vairel, F. (eds.) *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa* (Stanford University Press, 2011). John Chalcraft, 'Horizontalism in the Egyptian Revolutionary Process', *Middle East Report* 262/ Spring (2012), pp. 6-11.

[2] Immanuel Wallerstein, 'New Revolts against the System', *New Left Review* 18 (November-December 2002), pp. 29-39.

In the two-staged approach of old social movements, by which capturing state power was the first step to be followed by transforming the world, committed activists usually ended up discovering that:

> state power was more limited than they had thought…the cadres of a militant mobilising movement became the functionaries of a party in power. Their social positions were transformed and so, inevitably, were their individual psychologies...the militant, syndicalist tactics that had been the daily bread of the social movement became counter-revolutionary.[3]

It is this perceived betrayal of the movements' goals and inability of revolutionaries/new rulers to resist the corrupting influence of power and party politics which has created this deep suspicion among members of later generations of social movements. Their objective, therefore, has no longer been to take over state power but to challenge the boundaries of traditional politics and to establish decentralised alternatives. The image of a Leninist revolutionary party involving a rigid hierarchy and centralisation of power, iron discipline and leadership by a professional elite, which had dominated most of the twentieth century, furthered activists' aversion to centralised organisations. Such a model was perceived as profoundly opposed to the spontaneity, innovation and even radicalism of activists and protestors.[4] Activists everywhere, from Arab 'springs' to Spanish *indignados* to anti-austerity regimes in Greece, Italy, Portugal and Chile to Occupy movements and anticorruption movements in India, Brazil, Uganda and Thailand have been disillusioned with the potential of state institutions to be a space for radical change.[5] In this regard, Holloway argues:

> For over a hundred years, the revolutionary enthusiasm of young people has been channelled into building the party or into learning to shoot guns, for over a hundred years the dreams of those who have wanted a world fit for humanity have been bureaucratised and militarised, all for the sake of winning state power for a government that could then be accused of 'betraying' the movement that put it there…Rather than to look for so many betrayals as explanation, perhaps we need to look at the very notion that society can be changed through the winning of state power.[6]

In the case of Egypt, activists were not only protesting against the authoritarian regime but also against old forms of political opposition which had been rendered irrelevant. Decades of co-optation and repression had made political parties, labour unions and professional syndicates unable to represent the interests of those whom they were meant to champion and turned them, in many cases, into part of the repressive machinery of the regime.

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[3] Ibid., p. 32.

[4] Raymond B. Pratt, (1978) 'Toward a Critical Theory of Revolution' *Polity* 11/2 (1978), p. 177.

[5] It is important to mention that some of these networks of activism had actually metamorphosed into more formal political movements and parties such as Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain.

[6] Wallerstein, 'New Revolts against the System', p. 29.

## When Activists Become Revolutionaries

Over four years since the ousting of Mubarak, the situation in Egypt now seems to suggest that counter-revolutionary forces under the leadership of the military and state/capital nexus have conclusively written the end of the inchoate revolutionary movement. More repressive measures such as the anti-protest laws, the crackdown on civil society organisations and journalists, the closing down of the public space and waves of arrests and disappearances of activists have become the staple vocabulary of Egypt's political life, especially since the military takeover in the summer of 2013. However, it is without doubt that the point at which Mubarak was ousted marked a juncture where new and old actors became locked in a power contest with the potential for redrawing the political map. Historically, during such a phase after the fall of an old regime or at least its leaders, political arrangements either for assuming power or for setting the tone for a transitional period require some form of organisation.

This does not necessarily mean a centralised organisation but a coherent one. In Charles Tilly's words 'The presence of a coherent revolutionary organisation makes a great difference… An organisation facilitates the initial seizure of control, spreads the news, activates the commitments already made by specific men (*sic*)'.[7]

While the military and the Muslim Brotherhood quickly drew on their vast organisational structures and power bases after the downfall of Mubarak, groups of activists who occupied Tahrir Square and made Mubarak's ousting possible, frantically began to create 'revolutionary' networks and coalitions in an attempt to represent the millions who rose against Mubarak and to negotiate on their behalf. The history of these activists and their experience with political organisation in the previous decade have, however, dramatically shaped their ability to assume the task of a revolutionary vanguard. During a decade of vibrant activism, no activist group or network had entertained the thought of assuming state power. This was obviously a direct result of the impossibility of such a plan under the repressive regime, but also an outcome of the type of new horizontal politics which dominated the first decade of the 21st century. As a consequence, they had neither experienced any need to create institutions that could mobilise and lead towards capturing power nor worked on articulating a set of long-term political objectives.

The history of specific forms of political activism and its dynamics has a huge bearing on the emergence of organisational structures during revolutionary processes. As Petras argues, one of the key influences in shaping a revolutionary process is 'the origins and initial organisation of the revolutionary party…the political culture in which it is embedded…The insertion of the embryonic party into an ascending mass movement or within a politicised population is crucial in the creation of the collective experiences within which the cadres will frame their revolutionary

[7] Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company), 1978, p. 208.

programmes'.[8] While the reference to the 'revolutionary party' is not pertinent to the case of Egypt or to the forms of activism discussed in this contribution, the analysis still rings true.

'It did not start in Seattle' was a slogan used by activists of the Global Justice Movement to challenge the ahistorical popular claim that global activism could conveniently be marked by the Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO) ministerial conference in 1999. The objection was that such a claim ignored the historical continuity of national and global struggles against injustice and regimes of exploitation over the decades. In the same way, it is also naïve, if not outright indolent, of analysts to see the mass uprising in Tahrir and across Egypt's major squares as the spark of change. The tumultuous decade, which preceded the January 25th mass uprising, saw a whirlwind of social and political protests and an intensification of political mobilisation. Not a day passed without several incidents of collective, contentious action across the country taking place. While mobilisation took different forms and expanded to include large groups of Egyptians, labour and pro-democracy movements deserve a special focus for the potential they held - and might still hold - for leading to radical change.

The loosely termed 'pro-democracy' movement comprised a myriad of groups such as Kefaya, March 9 for Academic Freedoms, Doctors Without Rights, among others. These groups aimed to challenge the Mubaraks' rule with its succession plans and crony capitalism but were also taking on a whole political and economic order of neoliberal globalism and its manifestations in Egypt and the region. The second Palestinian Intifada in 2000, the war on Iraq in 2003, the privatisation of public goods, such as health care, and the liberalisation of trade enshrined in different agreements such as the Qualifying Industrial Zones (QIZ) were all elements of this order which activists mobilised against. The main characteristic of these groups is that they worked outside formal political institutions. They were organisationally informal and in some way they were protesting not only against the regime but also against the failed formal opposition, such as political parties and professional syndicates which had been rendered ineffective through successive regimes' policies of co-optation and repression. The strong appeal of the pro-democracy movement to a new generation of activists was the absence of a rigid hierarchy and of a traditional leadership. None of these groups had a formal structural set-up and never encouraged a notion of personalised 'leadership'. Kefaya and many of its 'sisters' for example were organised around the work of coordination committees rather than decision-making centres and the rotating position of a spokesperson rather than a central leader.

While the absence of a formal, traditional organisation was a strong rallying point for the pro-democracy movement, a debate about the sustainability and effectiveness of loose networks of activism was starting to resonate among some activists towards the end of the decade. The lack of an organisational form that could mobilise on a larger scale and better harness the energies of protestors was beginning to be seen as a weakness by some who started to worry that groups such as Kefaya were becoming no more

[8] James Petras, 'Socialist Revolutions and their Class Components', *New Left Review* 1/111 (1978), p. 38.

than 'event organisers' for rallies and marches rather than venues for building long-term, mass-based strategies.

The pro-democracy groups' main challenge was to develop their efforts from a series of protest events to a movement and to find an organisational form that allowed spontaneity and a lack of rigidity while at the same time ensuring sustainability. This challenge is not unique to the case of Egypt and has, indeed, been highlighted in various contexts where the survival of a revolutionary process requires institutions that can pose alternatives to the existing system, but which do not evolve to the point where they end up 'freezing its dialectic in a totalitarian bureaucratic monolith' (Pratt 1978:197). Under relentless police brutality and state security harassment, however, activists did not have the luxury of exploring new forms of organisation which would accommodate both needs.

With its technology-savvy, middle-class character, the pro-democracy movement received media and academic coverage both locally and internationally. Less attention, however, was paid to the growing ferment in the labour movement. Since the late 1990s, over two million Egyptian workers have staged an unprecedented number of strikes, demonstrations, occupations, hunger strikes and sit-ins in various sectors in response to reduced wages and deteriorating working conditions under the growing weight of neoliberal-inspired privatisation. One landmark protest was undoubtedly the Mahalla al-Kubra Spinning and Weaving Company strike in December 2006.

One prominent feature of labour protests during the decade leading up to the January 25 uprising was the ability of workers to organise not only outside of the formal unions but *despite* these unions. Gamal Abdel Nasser's corporatist strategies, which aimed to neutralise any political or social group from challenging his hegemony, meant that the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), which had been established in 1957 as the sole representative of workers at the national level, became a mere appendage of the state. Later, the infamous Unified Labour Law of 2003 not only allowed collective dismissal and legalised extending temporary contracts indefinitely, but also criminalised almost all forms of workers' strikes. Despite this, workers' action continued to grow. While protest action during the last decade was often spontaneous, many strikes, occupations and sit-ins eventually saw workers develop elected strike committees which took responsibility for negotiations with the management and in some occasions with top regime officials.[9]

More so than it was for the pro-democracy movement, the question of organisation was at the heart of workers' struggle. Beyond organising outside the formal, co-opted and corrupt ETUF workers were, more radically, challenging its long-held monopoly and demanding a renegotiation of the relationship between workers and the state to achieve greater autonomy. A landmark in this process was the successful launch of an independent trade union by the municipal tax collectors in 2009. However, labour action remained overwhelmingly localised. The absence of representative organisations and the ever-present stifling state security machinery meant that there was no

[9] Beinin, 'A Workers' Social Movement on the Margin of the Global Neoliberal Order, Egypt 2004-2009'.

agent within worker groups that was capable of taking the initiative to coordinate protest action or bringing labour activists together for an exchange of experiences and the setting of future agendas. Nascent organisations, mainly in the form of strike committees, which were set up to represent the demands of protesting workers, remained confined to individual companies and public sector departments with no sector-wide or national coordination.

## The Day After

On the eve of 25 January, many activists were tussling with the predicament of finding sustained organisational structures while maintaining the flexibility of their autonomous politics. However, the majority were mostly content with the tools and tactics they had developed, which were in line with new social movements working both at the global level and in the Global South. The considerable shift in political alignments that started with the uprising and Mubarak's downfall and the new-found opportunity to participate in shaping a new political process, in effect forced participants of the 18-day uprising to rethink their position. Days into the uprising, groups of activists began forming coalitions which were intended to coordinate the disparate groups occupying Tahrir Square, prioritise demands and later negotiate with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) on behalf of all protestors. The Revolution Youth Coalition (RYC) was one of the earliest to be formed. The RYC comprised representatives of different political leanings including groups and youth wings of the Muslim Brotherhood and liberal parties, leftist groups and cross-ideological groups and networks such as the Youth for Justice and Freedom Movement.[10] The RYC and other coalitions which followed did not manage to create a broadly-based alliance nor give rise to any other form of organisation which could claim a meaningful degree of representation. The principle of cross-ideological coalitions and loose networks which had served activists' needs during the Mubarak era was found wanting when confronted with challenges including deep ideological rifts between coalition partners and difficulties in coordination.[11]

Adopting a longer-term strategy, and exploiting the lifting of restrictions on political parties, activists rushed into creating parties as launching points for building mass bases and as an urgent measure for contesting imminent parliamentary elections designed by the SCAF. While over forty new political parties were created within a few short months, only 23 in total actually stood for elections in 2012. The overwhelming success of Islamist parties revealed the huge challenges facing new political parties, most of which allied themselves with other new or old parties in short-term tactical coalitions. However, the forging of quick political alliances among parties did not help

[10] Zeinab El-Guindy, 'Updated: Revolution Youth Coalition disband with end of Egypt's transitional phase', *Al-Ahram English*, 12 July 2012. Available at http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/46988.aspx (accessed 25 August 2012).
[11] Abdelrahman, 'With the Islamists? Sometimes…With the State? Never!', pp. 37-54.

solve such challenges or keep unlikely bedfellows united for very long. One major problem facing these coalitions is that they were formed along binary secular/Islamist lines as a focal point of unity among disparate groups.[12] Furthermore, they were created with the purpose of competing in a rushed process of parliamentary elections without having built distinct political programmes or a mass support base.

Analysing labour protests in the aftermath of Mubarak's downfall, Adly argued that if no strong, independent labour movement or political party representing the interests of workers emerged, alliances within the movement and the country as a whole would be drawn along identity lines such as religion.[13] Workers were indeed emboldened to launch the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) only days into the January uprising. It was created to represent and provide support to the hundreds of independent unions that were founded in the following months.

However, the hundreds of new independent unions and the EFITU itself have been shackled with legal restrictions[14] and successive government attempts to prevent their development into mass organisations. Moreover, the nascent union 'movement' has been beleaguered by both internal and external challenges, including internal divisions. It has become clear that creating independent union has not resulted in coalescing workers' efforts into a movement that could play a leadership role in Egypt's revolutionary process.

## Conclusion

Millions of activists, workers, farmers and 'unorganised' citizens were at the heart of Egypt's inchoate revolutionary movement that battled against the Mubarak regime. The tactics of mobilisation and resistance that they used were hugely successful in surviving the regime's brutality, challenging its hegemony and eventually removing its head. However, the same tactics have proven problematic during a different phase of the revolutionary process. The case of the Egyptian uprising and its unfolding developments raises theoretical questions on the relationship between protest movements everywhere and the notion of power. Movements of protest and resistance against a global capitalist order and its nationalist agents have proliferated since the beginning of the 21st century and in doing so they have employed new tactics and strategies. Paramount among these new methods has been their horizontal, non-hierarchical

[12] Carnegie Endowment, 'Guide to Egypt's Transition: Parties and Alliances'. Available at http://egyptelections.carnegieendowment.org/category/political-parties (accessed 25 August 2012).
[13] Amr Adly, 'Will the Revolution Turn Right or Left?', *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, 18 February 2011. Available at http://www.egyptindependent.com/opinion/will-revolution-turn-right-or-left (accessed 20 June 2015).
[14] One example is SCAF's decree Law 34/2011 which criminalises strikes and protests that curtail production and applies heavy fines and prison sentences for workers who participate in, call for or publicise strike activity (Human Rights Watch, 'Egypt: Revoke ban on strikes, demonstrations', 25 March 2011. Available at https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/03/25/egypt-revoke-ban-strikes-demonstrations (accessed 12 May 2012)).

organisational structures. However, beyond episodic waves of protest and momentary destabilisation of those in power, a question arises as to what else do these movements aim to achieve and what transformative projects can they offer? However, for most members of these social and protest movements, the very phrasing of this question is itself part of this old order, symptomatic of outdated modes of thinking and praxis.

In 2002, Naomi Klein stressed in a talk at the World Social Forum that 'the challenge to the movement does not lie in finding a vision but in resisting the desire to find one too quickly'. In many ways her logic is clear. Expecting activists dreaming of 'another possible world' to choose from a catalogue of existing but usually failed models or expecting them to come up with a blueprint, including organisational forms, for a new world order using the same failed logic, language and assumptions of the twentieth century paradigm is self-contradictory.

One can easily understand and sympathise with such a position in light of the disastrous history of anti-systemic movements of the previous century. However, we have to ask ourselves if, at certain moments, this resolutely-taken position does not make for self-limiting movements. During moments of intense crisis or moments when a regime or even the entire prevailing order is weakened, the potential perhaps arises to affect the social relations of power. The question then becomes how can activists ignore a moment pregnant with possibility and continue to struggle in isolated, small-scale ways. Can activists, in their battle to confront the injustices of the current global system and of national governments supporting its hegemony, afford to confine their struggles to critiquing the system and stirring up the streets against its agents without building structures, of whatever nature, which can sustain the energies of the millions aspiring for greater social justice. The recent electoral success of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain and the challenges both expect to face in negotiating with global capitalist institutions is an interesting development and an important moment for furthering a discussion on the question of organisation within protest movements.

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