

Egypt's Ongoing Uprising

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Just in time for the anniversary of the beginning of the Egyptian uprising, we've received this report from a comrade who participated in the most recent clashes in Cairo. It offers an overview of the current context in Egypt, along with photos and video footage from the front lines.

Live from the Streets of Cairo

When we heard gunshots coming from the cabinet building, we were certain they were blanks. Despite having seen the military use live rounds earlier that day, we had a naïve sense of security amongst the thousands in the streets.

When the screams and panic erupted as one of the people standing next to me was shot in the neck and rushed to the ambulances at the back of the crowd, we stayed put, along with most of the crowd. The calm we felt was a testament to a feeling of strength in numbers we had never experienced before.

The scene was surreal: a few hundred people at any given time exchanging projectiles with Egypt's military, while over a thousand more stood only a few meters away as the protest buffer zone. Among them, street vendors sold everything from snacks and tea to helmets and keffiyehs.

We'd been there since we woke up to the news that the army had burnt down the occupation at the Cabinet building. We knew that as night fell, things would get harder for us. Dodging the military projectiles from the roof would be tricky in the dark, and without media there, the military would fight even dirtier. But the determination of the crowd was contagious, and we couldn't pull ourselves away.

A Year of Revolt

One year ago, millions of Egyptians took to the streets and occupied public squares as part of the wave of revolts popularly referred to as the Arab Spring. Inspired by the uprising in Tunisia, Egyptians overcame the paralysis of fear and met their oppressors head-on, clashing with the police on National Police Day. The people were dispersed, but confrontations continued in neighborhoods and streets across Egypt, spreading police numbers thin while systematically destroying police infrastructure and readying the masses for the Day of Rage. On January 28, the people of Cairo retook Tahrir square, breaking through police barricades with decentralized marches originating from neighborhoods throughout the city. With the police defeated and withdrawn, neighborhood patrols spontaneously emerged to protect neighborhoods, while Tahrir was transformed into an autonomous zone and tent city. Two weeks later, the streets erupt in joyful celebration as Mubarak surrendered power.

One year later, the third round of elections has just concluded, while the military still holds political power. They also hold over 12,000 political prisoners, who are being hastily sentenced in military trials. The streets of Cairo are filled with graffiti and the residue of political protests that became street fights. Walls made of huge concrete slabs block roads where

the military and police faced off with protesters only months earlier; the marble sidewalks remain torn up where street militants recently improvised ammunition. Some neighborhood assemblies have transformed into “popular committees in the defense of the revolution,” working on issues ranging from basic services to local governance. Meanwhile, over 100 independent trade unions were formed, breaking the state’s former monopoly on organized labor.

From the Circle As spray painted on the sides of government buildings to the explosion of independent and federated trade unions, anarchist currents can be seen throughout Egypt as its people scramble to win revolutionary change following their great revolutionary moment. But this isn’t the first time that anarchist currents, both implicit and explicit, have been part of Egypt’s political landscape.

Greek anarchists based in Cairo and Alexandria were instrumental in establishing Egypt’s first trade union, the cigarette rollers’ union, in 1899. Italian anarchists were also involved in Egypt’s union movement until the 1950s, but the independent union movement was crushed following the military coup of 1952. The independent trade union movement re-emerged in late 2006, but only really materialized in late 2008.

Unions played a key role in the success of the uprising of January 25. Starting on February 7, a public transport strike across Greater Cairo, coupled with labor protests along the Suez Canal—along with other industrial actions across the country—helped bring down Mubarak on February 11.

The revolution also led to the birth of the first independent trade union federation in Egypt’s history. Since its founding on the fifth day of the revolution, over 100 independent trade unions, syndicates, and professional associations have been formed, including one for public transport. It has also spurred authorities into dissolving the board of the state-controlled Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), which had monopolized the union movement—by law—since 1957.

But revolutions aren’t just confined to the workplace. While strikes and other industrial actions put economic pressure on the regime, the success Egyptians had in liberating the streets from police control is largely due to another organized group. The “Ultras,” Egypt’s extreme football fans, were some of the most well-prepared and coordinated groups in the marches toward Tahrir. They became the front line in the battle with police to regain access to the square. Organizing via online message boards after one of their own was killed at Tahrir, they came out in force on the Day of Rage. They maintained a strong presence within the square during the occupation, especially at times when the occupiers were most threatened by state and para-state violence.

Before last January, “Ultras” were regarded as apolitical football hooligans who liked to cause trouble. However, they were one of the only social groups in Egypt with experience fighting police, and their central role in winning the streets has made their popularity skyrocket. Ultras groups have tens of thousands of members across the Egypt, many of whom identify as anarchists. Although Ultras organizations refuse to be officially placed on the political spectrum, their tactics and modes of organizing are extremely anti-authoritarian. They organize without leaders or hierarchies, refuse financial sponsorships, fight against the commercialization of sport, and live their lives in conflict with state security forces. “All

"Cops Are Bastards" is a central tenet of the Ultras, and through graffiti and chants they have popularized this slogan in Egyptian society.

The Ultras were the first to use graffiti to discuss police brutality and freedom of expression, and this attracted supporters and members in the years before the revolution. Today, ACAB is the most common graffiti tag in Cairo and is scrawled on walls in other cities across Egypt as well. The Ultras continue to be a powerful social force giving teeth to the movement, showing up to protests with fireworks, Molotov cocktails, flares, and songs of defiance that have been widely adopted.

The revolutionary movement born out of Tahrir also attracted many who were traditionally excluded from formal political organizing: the millions who survive through direct action and subsist on as little as a dollar a day. The street kids and slum-dwellers that made Tahrir their home stayed there once the party was over. The conditions that led them to revolt had not changed with the fall of a politician, so their occupation continued. Street youth as young as six continue to be some of the bravest and dedicated fighters in this revolution, ripping out the paving stones and running to the front with makeshift shields, keffiyehs, and slings. Egyptian state media dismisses them as thrill-seekers without political motivations, or claim they've been paid or forced to fight. But seen dodging live rounds through clouds of tear gas, these young Egyptians bear a striking resemblance to the iconic rock-throwing Palestinian youth that many say inspire them.

In the sprawling expanse of informal neighborhoods surrounding Cairo, self-organization is a means of daily survival. Those without homes build on squatted land or occupy vacant structures. They seize water and electricity when the authorities turn them off, and clash with police when they raid neighborhoods to evict or shut off essential services. Pockets of gated communities inhabited by Cairo's upper-class fence out the growing excluded class and make visible the intense stratification of wealth in Egyptian society today.

But some of Egypt's growing underclass, emboldened by the revolution, are going on the offensive. They have begun highly orchestrated waves of occupations targeting empty apartment buildings in more affluent areas. A coordinated takeover of over 2000 housing units in 6th of October City only a few months ago forced a major confrontation with the thousands of soldiers deployed to evict them. The squatters defended their new homes with firearms and Molotov cocktails. Others stormed apartment buildings in Sheikh Zeyad City, occupying flats and demanding permanent housing. These high profile actions are a testament to the growing strength of different communities that organize horizontally and act collectively.

And it's not only in the slums. Examining the construction of much of contemporary Cairo, you can tell that informal development has occurred with minimal intervention or assistance from the state, mostly through either the organization of neighboring plot owners or just spontaneous development checked by the intervention and negotiations of neighbors. This has led to a fairly high functioning system of neighborhoods, albeit with some common problems having to do with planning issues around green space, street widths, and building heights. Still, the outcomes have met a serious set of needs without any real action by government, and definitely display evidence of some planning and cooperation at the local level.

During the original occupation of Tahrir, neighborhood self-governance again became a necessity. The already minimal functioning of government infrastructure ceased, and plain-clothes police even took part in organized looting in attempts to terrify people. Popular neighborhood committees appeared throughout the entire country within the matter of a night. People came down from their apartments to the streets in the midst of a mobile phone and internet blackout and set up checkpoints and communications systems to defend their neighborhoods from police and other anti-social elements.

Within Tahrir, an autonomous community also emerged. Clinics and logistics tents met the needs of the protesters, while discussion groups, lectures, concerts, a library, a school, and even a regular "Cinema Tahrir" ensured that the square became a space for political education and the forging of deep relationships. Like the Occupy protests it inspired, these initiatives were supported by donations and self-organized by volunteers. Mutual aid and voluntary association became the norm, and the logic of capitalism and power relations faded. But the occupation didn't come without issues. Thieves and thugs were a persistent problem throughout Tahrir, one that led to the creation of jails and vigilante security and justice systems with varying degrees of respect for human rights. Still, many Egyptian anarchists rightly point out that the occupation of Tahrir and the subsequent Cabinet occupation were successful experiments in anarchy.

A year ago, the exploits of revolutionaries in Egypt turned Tahrir square into a household name. But a few blocks away another occupation shook the foundations of power more recently. People fed up with military rule and disenchanted with elections occupied the entrance to the cabinet building in order to prevent meetings from taking place there and to protest military rule. In the early hours of December 16, this occupation became the latest flashpoint of social war in Egypt. The military kidnapped and seriously beat an occupier, then burnt the entire occupation to the ground, kicking off five straight days of intense street battles. Unlike all the clashes that came before, the people were no longer facing off with the universally despised police forces, but with the army.

People woke up to the news that protesters were under attack and rushed to the scene where a once lively and blossoming tent city had been reduced to fires and rubble in the streets. Rocks were flying through the windows of the cabinet building at the soldiers who had retreated inside, and the numbers in the street continued to grow into the thousands. For the next five days, Tahrir became the convergence point and staging ground for a 24-hour-a-day battle with the military. First-aid clinics opened up and banks closed. Youth could be seen breaking ATMs and ripping marble off the walls and paving stones out of the ground to use as projectiles. The cabinet building was set on fire repeatedly with Molotov cocktails, while soldiers dropped huge chunks of concrete off the rooftop indiscriminately into the crowds, injuring dozens. At some points, the people seemed to be winning, at others the army looked as if it had the upper hand, but there was no mistaking this for a mere protest; this was full-scale conflict.

People were pushed back to Tahrir, but even though the military began using live ammunition and lethal force, their first attempt to clear the square failed. As rocks rained on them from every direction, they retreated back to the ruins of the cabinet building. To formalize the stalemate, a huge wall made of concrete slabs was erected, completely blocking the road

between Tahrir square and the cabinet. But the fighting simply continued down a different street. The next day, the military succeeded in clearing Tahrir and burning occupation infrastructure to the ground. But new groups arrived to fight them and they were pushed back once again. While the State television was creating conspiracy theories about the protesters and showing child-protesters claiming that they were paid to fight in the streets, the independent media was documenting the abuses, the casualties, and the real reasons behind the conflict. The image of a woman being dragged and beaten by police as they lifted off her niqab to reveal her blue bra eventually led to the end of the street battle. In response to that image and reports of sexual abuse in detention, a women's march of thousands gathered and decisively pushed back a humiliated army, ending the military confrontation in victory on its fifth day.

As has been the case for the last century, women have been on the front lines of this revolution leading marches and chants, writing and distributing leaflets, fighting police, doing independent media work, and serving in popular committees. Defying the culture of patriarchy that still exists in much of Egyptian society, women shattered sexist stereotypes with their actions and empowered themselves to push the revolution forward in all spheres of daily life.

Some women are now running for the highest levels of government. But like their male counterparts that abandoned the streets for the political process, they are about to realize the bitter truth about "democracy." As the elections wrap up, it is clear that the winners of Egypt's so-called "democratization" will be the once-outlawed Muslim Brotherhood. This isn't exclusively because so many revolutionaries decided to boycott the elections. The Muslim Brotherhood's "Freedom and Justice" party had the financial capacity to pay for the big campaign that bought them the votes of many Egyptians. In Egypt as in other capitalist democracies, the axiom *one dollar = one vote* rings truer than ever. Although economic conditions were a major spark for the uprising a year ago, the MB have the exact same economic policies as their predecessors. So many Egyptians who simply voted for the party with the deepest and longest-running conflict with their previous rulers will have to take it to the streets to topple their government yet again in the near future.

Alongside the widespread implicitly anti-authoritarian currents, explicitly anarchist organizing has also been growing throughout Egypt's ongoing revolutionary process. Individual anarchists have played key roles in the revolution from organizing protests and occupation logistics to doing independent media work. Meanwhile, anarchist conferences and assemblies are also being organized by a growing anarcho-syndicalist organization called the Libertarian Socialist Movement. With members in Cairo and Alexandria and connections to international anarchist networks, the LSM is starting to also attract enemies, entering into conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood and others.

As empowered protesters build organizations, coordinate direct actions, and become increasingly bold in demanding revolutionary change, institutionalized repression continues to rise. People drafted their own trade union law, while the military made laws criminalizing strikes; independent media has risen to new heights of popularity, while the state media has become more blatant in their lies against the protest movement; and people continue to fight authority in the streets, while 12,000 are locked up and denied due process in military

tribunals. Egyptian society is experiencing diverging realities. On one hand, people are determined to finish the revolution that sparked a year ago; on the other, elections mask the continuation of state dominance and co-opt the potential of an emerging social order.

Breathless Conclusion: To Be Continued...

The revolution was alive in every moment. The determination of people in the streets to finish what they started last year was matched by the urgency we felt from our comrades to actualize the revolution within broader society. Every moment was an opportunity to seize the future, and everybody knew it.

Before the clashes broke out, we spent every night talking about revolution, analyzing the present and strategizing for the future. I could only imagine that there were thousands more conversations like these happening throughout Egypt. When we said our goodbyes—which we hoped would only be “see you later”—there was a gravity to the moment. While my new friends may be celebrating victories in the streets and might even win this battle in the long run, some could be killed, injured, or taken prisoner by the military in the days and months to come. The same risks will apply to all of us once we each begin to “fight like an Egyptian.” The pyramids of power weren’t built in a day, and the epic task of dismantling them may take a little while yet, but it is well underway in Egypt.

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