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BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Revolution and Counterrevolution in Egypt

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Egypt under El-Sisi: A Nation on the Edge. Maged Mandour (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2024). Pp. 224. $27.00 hardback. ISBN: 9780755649150

Revolution Squared: Tahrir, Political Possibilities, and Counterrevolution in Egypt. Atef Shahat Said (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023). Pp. 334. $109.95 hardback, $29.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781478025504

Counter Revolutionary Egypt: From the Midan to the Neighbourhood. Dina Wahba (London: Routledge, 2023). Pp. 138. $165.00 hardback. ISBN: 9781003408741

Tahrir's Youth: Leaders of a Leaderless Revolution. Rusha Latif (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2022). Pp. 337. $35.00 hardback. ISBN: 9781649030207

Revolutionary Life: The Everyday of the Arab Spring. Asef Bayat (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021). Pp. 324. $36.00 hardback. ISBN: 9780674987890

Why did the Egyptian revolution happen? How did it happen? Was it planned? What did it achieve? Was it defeated? These are some of the questions that usually surface in January each year, and during grim anniversaries of the infamous massacres that Egyptians witnessed after the 2013 military coup against Egypt's first elected president.

The 2011 Egyptian uprising is often characterized by Western journalists as a social media revolt, with an emphasis on the role of the Internet and platforms like Twitter and Facebook in organizing or instigating it. This narrative, however, is problematic on a number of levels. Such accounts imply that millions of Egyptians were mobilized into a revolt by a Facebook "event" or Twitter hashtags following the murder of Khalid Saʿid, the Alexandrian young man who was tortured to death by the police in the summer of 2010. The uprising is, therefore, perceived in the Western media as a solo incident that suddenly came into existence without context. In reality, the 2011 uprising was the culmination of a long process of dissent that had gained momentum over the previous decade.

The 1990s were tough times for dissidents in Egypt. In 1992, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak declared a "war on terror" and embarked on a neoliberal transition plan, sponsored by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The regime claimed it was only targeting terrorists, but the reality was different. Mubarak started by cracking down on the Islamic Jihad and al-Jamaʿa al-Islamiyya. Soon after, the scope of repression widened. The police force was militarized. The emergency law was tightened. New prisons were built to house the ever-growing incarcerated population behind bars. Citizens were tried in military courts. Industrial actions were met with brute force. Assassinations and enforced disappearances were frequent. Living in Cairo at the time, one felt as though it was a city under occupation: police checkpoints, random searches, and a heavy security presence in public spaces. The "terrorist" became not only any member of a radical jihadi group, but

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also members of the reformist Muslim Brothers, leftist student activists, labor strikers, and any citizen who dared to dissent.

When Mubarak's fearful and longest-serving interior minister in Egypt's modern history, Habib al-Adly, assumed office in 1997, the militant groups had already been largely crushed by the security services. But al-Adly continued the "war on terror" in a business-as-usual fashion until he was deposed, along with Mubarak, in 2011. Alongside the war on terror, al-Adly also declared a war on crime, or, to be more accurate, what he framed as a "war on thuggery." The newspapers in the late 1990s and throughout the 2000s whipped up fear of crime. Sensationalist media reports appeared regularly about the "criminal thugs" who were turning the streets into unsafe jungles of lawlessness. And, naturally, the police had to increase their presence to respond to this threat. Special laws were enacted, defining in broad, vague terms who was a "thug." Police powers to stop and frisk citizens were unlimited in the name of law and order.

The outbreak of the Palestinian Second Intifada in 2000 changed the political game. The rise of al-Jazeera and other satellite channels resulted in the uprising being aired live on television to millions of Egyptians. Seeing visuals of Palestinian kids taking on Israeli tanks with rocks encouraged Egyptians to confront Mubarak's police. It is this domino effect that Arab regimes have historically feared whenever Palestinian resistance flares. The Second Intifada was indeed an earth-shaking, regional event, which triggered a chain reaction over the following decade that eventually led to the 2011 uprising.

In the first chapter of *Revolution Squared: Tahrir, Political Possibilities, and Counterrevolution in Egypt*, Atef Said, a veteran socialist activist and rights lawyer in Egypt, gives us a panoramic view of the dissident scene, providing a necessary history of the 2000s and the rise of street politics. He charts how Tahrir Square acquired prominence during previous waves of protests. This context is crucial for grasping how social uprisings come into existence as complex and protracted political processes, as opposed to sudden occurrences out of the blue. Said details how, in this earlier era, dissident activist organizations received a shot in the arm. Successive waves of protests in October 2000, March and April 2002, and March 2003 drew increasing numbers of Egyptians, mostly students, and what Asef Bayat, an American-Iranian sociologist who resided in Egypt before and after the 2011 uprising, describes in *Revolutionary Life: The Everyday of the Arab Spring* as the "middle-class poor" (p. 9). The members of this class were neither blue collar workers nor elites and worked mostly white collar professional jobs, seeing their incomes decline thanks to neoliberal policies. This class would play the most influential role in the 2011 uprising.

In *Tahrir's Youth: Leaders of a Leaderless* Revolution, Rusha Latif follows the path of twenty-five youth who belonged to the middle-class poor. An ethnographer by training, Latif embedded herself after 2011 with the leaders of the Coalition of Revolutionary Youth (RYC), which included some of the most prominent youth activists involved in the uprising. Most of the members of this entity traced their politicization to the outbreak of the Second Intifada, which took them on a trajectory across the decade to Tahrir Square. The regional mobilizations triggered by the Palestinian intifada and the US-led invasion of Iraq managed to carve out a tiny margin in public spaces where activists could organize, such as the Journalists Syndicate, the Bar Association, Tahrir's Mugammaʿ, and the parliament. It was in this context that the Kefaya, an anti-Mubarak movement whose members were mostly from the middle classes, was born in 2004. Kefaya's protests over the following two years did not attract a mass following on the ground but did electrify the country and destroy the Mubarak taboo. Soon, dissent spread to the working class, and mass strikes broke out by the end of 2006, starting in the Nile Delta textile mills, the historical hotbed of industrial militancy. The labor protests, which engulfed the country, were the longest and most sustained strike action in Egypt since 1946 and played a central role in paving the road to 2011.

But how did Egyptians, who appeared submissive to their ruler in the 1990s, revolt in the next decade? Egyptian feminist scholar Dina Wahba takes up this question in *Counter Revolutionary Egypt: From the Midan to the Neighbourhood*. She introduces the concept of "contagion of affect and emotion" and demonstrates how this notion is central to political mobilization (p. 46). Specifically, when addressing how the wall of fear surrounding Mubarak's regime fell, Wahba shows how a common emotional experience united Egyptians in collective action. Egyptians, in the early 2000s, felt emboldened to take to the streets after watching Palestinian resistance to the Israeli occupation. Although they did not share a physical space, Egyptians were in a state of affective solidarity with Palestinians, facilitated by the presence of satellite stations that beamed visuals of dissent and resistance from elsewhere, whether from Palestine or a decade later from Tunisia with the fall of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. In the run-up to 2011, Kefaya's small protests also were aired live to millions of Egyptians through al-Jazeera and the newly rising private-owned media. Although Kefaya had hardly any roots among the workers, the latter were watching. The destruction of the Mubarak taboo meant the destruction of all other taboos related to power structures in society, and these included the CEOs of the firms against which the workers started staging their industrial actions. The role of visuals and these connections are seldom discussed by scholars in the literature on dissent and social movements in Egypt before 2011. This lacuna, arguably, may be the result of the walls erected between the social science disciplines, which deprive scholars of interdisciplinary insights.

The outbreak of the 2011 uprising has raised several questions concerning spontaneity, "horizontal structures," and "leaderless" movements. Was the revolution planned or purely spontaneous? Here, Latif's book constitutes a compelling intervention. The author argues that the revolution was both planned and spontaneous. Latif's interviews with the RYC leaders provide an inside picture of the organizational efforts that helped to make the uprising possible and managed the swelling crowds. Ultimately, Latif explains, the "leaders" of the "leaderless" revolution mostly belonged to political organizations and movements that were fluid, rather than a centralized revolutionary party, as advocated by the Bolsheviks. Also, the scope of the mobilizations, especially in 2011, was beyond the control and leadership of any of the involved parties. Such fluidity and lack of solid structures might have been useful in avoiding the complete squashing of the groups by security crackdowns, but also was responsible for much of the fragmentation that took place after Mubarak's overthrow.

Said, who extensively interviewed activists involved in the uprising, also confirms there was no "central" organizing entity for the square. Instead, there were several organizing efforts and networks playing out simultaneously, which eventually made the Tahrir sit-in possible. In so many ways, these efforts were built on the traditions and experiences of the previous decade. Yet, in 2011, the scope of the mobilization was unprecedented. "The general feeling was that what was happening was too large for any one group to control," however, Said observes, "that was seen not as an impediment but as a boon" (pp. 73–74). Wahba, for her part, captures some of the most powerful dynamics of the initial success of the uprising in ousting the dictator through collective action and a collective identity, forged by the battle for the square. Nevertheless, following Mubarak's ouster, the broad revolutionary alliance that enabled the eighteen-day uprising fractured. The organized Islamist forces sought an alliance with the Supreme Council for Armed Forces (SCAF), whereas the left and liberals took a different path. SCAF found it useful to employ the same discourse used by Mubarak and al-Adly before 2011 to bring the country back under control. The media sensationally reported on crime and attacks by "thugs" everywhere, who were allegedly killing citizens in the streets, mass raping women, torching buildings, and breaking into cars. Egyptian state television went so far as to have a daily program titled "Security for All," which provided a daily dose of fear and mass paranoia.

In the name of fighting "thuggery," 12,000 citizens were tried in martial courts in 2011 alone, many of whom were revolutionaries nabbed at protests, or poor urban youth who were at the wrong place at the wrong time. Here, Wahba's *Counter Revolutionary Egypt* provides an impressive account of this renewed use of the "thug" and "terrorist" narrative during the revolution and in the aftermath of the coup to help the forces that sought to diffuse and obliterate the revolutionary wave. Such counterrevolutionary efforts, Latif argues, also were facilitated by shortcomings in the revolutionary camp. She contends that one of the main problems that led to the failed transition and collapse of the RYC was their inability to make compromises as a result of pressure from the more radical leftist voices. This claim merits scrutiny. Was the problem that the RYC and other forces did not compromise enough? Or, did they not go far enough in their confrontation with the SCAF? Latif attributes the inability of the protagonists to make compromises to moral purity and left-wing extremism. This argument, notably, has become popular among some former revolutionaries and, specifically, the liberals. For instance, Belal Fadl, a famous writer now in exile, has repeatedly asserted that the revolution should have assured the senior brass that their interests would not be harmed, to avoid direct confrontation that would end in bloodshed. Fadl and others who espouse these views hailed in 2019 the agreement between the Sudanese opposition and the military and Rapid Support Forces (RSF), regarding such a move as "reasonable" and "pragmatic." A quick look at Sudan today, however, raises questions about whether this course was indeed correct. Despite the massive compromises agreed upon by the Sudanese revolutionaries, the military and RSF went ahead with a coup against the civilian government, leading the country into a bloody ongoing civil war. Returning to Egypt, one should ask, was the problem the inability of the revolutionaries to compromise, or the fact that they compromised too much? As Louis Antoine de Saint-Just once wrote, "Those who make revolutions halfway dig their own graves."

In *Revolutionary Life*, Asef Bayat employs the term "refolutions," which was originally coined by Timothy Garton Ash when describing the peaceful and negotiated character of the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe. Bayat, however, utilizes this concept differently. Whereas in the former case a profound change in the nature of the economies and the regimes took place, Bayat argues that in the case of Egypt and other Arab Spring uprisings the participants, at best, hoped to reform their states and systems or to pressure the state to deliver those reforms rather than take things into their own hands. As Bayat observes, "state power did not really collapse and no insurgent group was willing and able to seize power" (p. 12). The sociopolitical actors who triggered and mobilized the uprisings also did not take power. Despite this, Bayat does not dismiss the uprisings. He is more interested in investigating the daily lives of Egyptians and Tunisians, especially those of different marginalized groups, and what changes, if any, have happened in workplaces, farms, neighborhoods, families, cyberspaces, and schools. Bayat argues that a great deal of the mobilization dynamics during the revolts can be attributed to "nonmovements" (p. 27). Unlike revolutions in the 20th century when parties with clear ideological leanings and structures took the lead, Bayat sees unofficial networks of kin, friends, neighbors, schoolmates, and others playing the central role in shaping events in the current century. Building on this argument, Bayat sees the popular protest movement turning into a revolutionary contender only when different subaltern groups relinquish their particularistic demands "in favor of broader calls for greater good for all—dignity, democracy, or justice" (p. 39). This scenario, he contends, is when "identities fade in favor of an affective and strategic urge for unity and collective equality" (p. 39). Such unity, notably, is usually temporary, since as soon as the dictator falls each subaltern group endeavors to achieve its goals and interests. Bayat proceeds to elucidate attempts by marginalized sectors of society to challenge the structures of power in their daily lives. Reading *Revolutionary Life*, however, one encounters a sudden rupture in time. Bayat concludes that such societal changes were brought to a halt and even reverted to a worse situation than what existed before. Yet one feels perplexed about why and how this happened.

Here, Said's critique of *Revolutionary Life* in *Revolution Squared* is convincing. Said writes that Bayat "downplays the role of counterrevolution" and does "not provide us with any satisfactory analysis" of how the counterrevolutionary forces crushed the uprisings (p. 24). Instead, Bayat focuses on the limitations of the revolutionaries (or "refolutionaries") in championing change. Said, for his part, investigates the role of the "popular committees" that sprang up spontaneously across Egypt to provide security for the neighborhoods as soon as the police vanished after the Friday of Rage. These committees, in some cases, constituted the de facto authority in their areas, taking over the tasks of the state. They were far from perfect and lacked revolutionary articulation, Said argues, but they had potential. However, the energies of the revolutionary forces seemed to focus, sometimes with the blessing of the counterrevolution, only on the square, failing to resolve the relationship between Tahrir and other places of mobilization. Said, at the same time, highlights the role of the workers and the urban poor in the revolt, but sadly their voices were not heard as loudly as those of other more affluent classes. I was witness to this in 2011 during my frustrated attempts, with my comrades in the Revolutionary Socialists, to "take Tahrir to the factories." Young, middle-class revolutionaries, as well as the established political forces, seemed more interested in the square, its symbolism, and the ability to have a direct confrontation with the security forces than in channeling these resources to support the flaring industrial actions in workplaces. We tried to raise the slogan "The square and the factory are one hand!" but this chant did not gain the necessary traction. In so many ways, the square and the social movements in workplaces and neighborhoods existed in two separate worlds. Political demands outshone the economic demands of the revolution, partially due to the cross-class coalitions, which were usually celebrated as "inclusive" and a precondition for the "success" of the transition. The revolution was "squared" in Tahrir, deprived of the social depth any revolutionary transformation requires to make an impact.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2013 military coup, there were discussions among activists and pundits on the nature of the regime that evolved out of the bloodbath. Many, including me, initially thought the counterrevolution was restoring the old order of Hosni Mubarak. We were wrong. Maged Mandour's *Egypt under El-Sisi: A Nation on the Edge* is indispensable to understanding the evolution of the post-2013 regime. Armed with Gramscian tools, Mandour dissects Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's regime, explaining how it was, in fact, a new regime, with more discontinuities than similarities with Mubarak's authoritarian formula in the fields of politics, economics, and the social sphere. A counterrevolution does not restore the old order, simply because the old order failed to repress its challengers. In the eyes of the counterrevolutionaries, Mandour explains, the old regime failed at social and political control, which eventually led to the outbreak of the uprising. As they crush the revolution, the counterrevolutionaries seek to avoid the mistakes of the past, which they perceive to have led to the breakdown of law and order. Sisi and the army generals who led the coup regarded Mubarak as too lenient, too weak, and too comprising. Therefore, they proceeded to build a new order that completely squashed civil society and all forms of civilian power. The regime employed and championed new practices to achieve its political hegemony, which Mandour scrutinizes. These included a heavy reliance on ideological indoctrination and all-out militarization of the economy and state organs. Wahba focuses more on the counterrevolution's use of urban restructuring as a tool to crush the revolt and consolidate the new regime by attempting to uproot the urban poor communities who backed the revolt from the heart of the capital. In this regard, Mandour's and Wahba's books complement one another. The first scrutinizes the changes in the structures of state power, and the latter considers those who are on the receiving end of state repression. The result is a comprehensive picture of Egypt's counterrevolution.

On multiple fronts, the five books that constitute this review essay are in conversation with one another, even when their authors did not intend it. They collectively present an invaluable contribution to scholars of authoritarianism and social movements, as well as anyone trying to understand how Egypt, after years of hope and struggle, has landed with such an Orwellian regime.

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