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The Left in Egypt's political geography

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Hamid Dabashi has argued that the Arab Spring challenges the postcolonial identity and creates a new emancipatory geographical imagination. The rapidly changing political geography in Egypt is indicating that the Left is searching for its political identity in the post-Mubarak era. Even though the Islamist domination in the political scene is obvious, the Left and the workers' struggle has been intensified, despite the quandary. The fluid identities of most of the nascent coalitions are struggling to secure a place in this new geographical imagination.

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More than two years have passed since the ignition of the Arab uprisings and the ouster of the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, on February 11th 2011. The political landscape is changing rapidly and the ongoing revolutionary processes are creating an even more fluid and uncertain political future for the Arab peoples. In Egypt, as well as in Tunisia and Libya, the religious powers have gained important ground and legitimacy in the consciousness of society, not only through the medium of parliamentary elections, but by controlling the media and practicing suppressive methods in the streets in order to sustain some sort of national congruence. The Left is one of the main rivals of the religious state structures and played an important role in the revolution. Yet, the ideological term “Left” is not predefined, cohesive, nor clear when it comes to Arab countries.

To understand the ongoing ideological transformations, it is useful to realize that the lines between Left and Right, as is the case between secular and religious, are obscure and eerie in the Arab world. The region, throughout history, has been multifaceted and perplexing, and contemporary realities relate to the social and hegemonic relations that are created within it. The discursive culture that is produced during a revolutionary period drastically affects the language of the ideas expressed. These enactments are captured in the ideologies that are produced from the revolutionary demands. Thus, ideologies should not be accounted as rigid formations, but merely as tools that help one understand and describe the world. One needs to historicize them and see that an interdisciplinary approach and even a cross-ideological insight is needed to describe the fluidity of the political identities in Egypt and the Middle East.¹

The two main ideologies in Egypt, liberalism and Islamism, though quite opposed to each other in theory, may share common interests and even common policies. Historically they may have even had, at times, common enemies and grievances (either political or economic) that brought them closer to each other. The term “Islamic Left” that emerged in the late ‘80s fittingly describes the mosaic of Egyptian political ideologies, referring to the fluidity of the official policies of each side, but also to someone’s personal religiosity². The ideology of everyday life, as Asef Bayat suggested in *Life as Politics*, can finally play a determining role in the making of the political consciousness.

The main challenges that the Left needs to deal with urgently are: the unprecedented assault by the main religious powers and by the supporters of the old regime, the formation of a strong and united front in order to gain the best results in the next parliamentary and presidential elections, an insistent presence in the current political and social struggles and the creation of cohesive and dominant leftist politics. The vast de-politicization that took place during the last decades in Egypt, as a target policy of the past regimes, has given the opportunity to political powers such as the Islamists and the neoliberals to gain more and more control. The void created by this de-politicization can be exploited by more than one political power. Nevertheless, there are two sides belonging to the Left in Egypt. One is the traditional Left, which has assented to play the role of a pillar in authoritarian regimes (which as a main goal had the maintaining of the secular character of the state and national unity, as was the case with the liberal Tagammou party). On the other side, there is the Left that has played a “disturbing role” in the state’s plans for imposing neoliberal policies and halting any chance for democratization³. The latter has played an important role in the workers’ struggle against large industries in the past decade. In Egypt, leftist and socialist policies are often demonized, mainly by Islamists but also by liberals, who criticize these policies as the reason for the financial backwardness of the country that took place during the nasserist era.

The Egyptian state seems more like a hybrid state inside the Arab world. It always tried to adopt a profile that would assimilate some pro-western values alongside the cultural and

religious claims that dominated society. Therefore, Egypt has been both, and ironically so, one of the most liberal states in the Arab world regarding personal liberties and human rights, and a highly regulating state, having banned a variety of basic liberties and acted with intense statism⁴. This contradiction occurs due to American and European influences in the region, influences which were prescribed by the call for democratic reforms and the need for the local preservation of the western financial and political interests. In Egypt a plethora of NGOs are operating; and although there are several NGOs that have been repressed by the state due to their 'western' activities, a number of them are preaching Islamism and religious values, while others, allegedly working on human rights, are often supported by the state.

In the last years, several leftist political groups appeared in the Egyptian public sphere, like the "6th April", the "We are all Khaled Said" and the "National Organization for Change" of M. El Baradei. Today, the Egyptian Left is in a process of reconstruction and reconceptualization of its own identification and in an endeavour to break the chains of decades of isolation. New alliances are being formed and new parties are emerging. In 2006 there was the idea of the creation of an alliance of leftist parties in Egypt, in a period when the workers' movement was struggling to improve working conditions in general. Notwithstanding the difficulties and the state repression, a lot of demands were fulfilled. Nowadays, the new parties law curbs the possibility of the formation of several leftist parties. The two main obstacles for the official registration of a party are the lack of funding sources and the prerequisite of the 5.000 official members needed from at least ten different governorates. Another restriction is the prohibition of a party formation in class criteria, which prevents many workers' movements from becoming official parties. Many, however, prefer to promote the interests of the working class directly in the work places than forming a party⁵.

After 25th January 2011 there was the emergence of the Popular Democratic Alliance Party, a group of five parties which decided to form a united front so that the Left could be more condensed and thus more ideologically stable. The Popular Democratic Alliance Party includes the Tagammu Party, the Socialist Party of Egypt, the Egyptian Communist Party, the Workers' Democratic Party and the trotskyist Revolutionary Socialists. This coalition is also keened by the rise of the Islamic parties, such as the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party and the Salafist affiliated al-Nour Party. The Workers Democratic Party is a grassroots organization that aims at organizing workers and farmers without seeking to upgrade its status to a party, and is probably the most radical of all leftist groups. Many critics from the conservative and Islamist bloc have retaliated against this coalition on the grounds that it is antinationalist and that it creates polarization in the social and political sphere. Meanwhile, in May 2011 the Egyptian Independent Trade Union Federation was created, in reaction to the state-controlled Egyptian Trade Union Federation. The latter was accused, among other corruption matters, of taking part in the so-called "Battle of the Camels" in Tahrir square. It therefore seems that there is a great political and social activity that can be justified by the discontent of the Egyptian people regarding the former but also the new regime. This discontent has grown bigger since 'Esam Sharaf, the Egyptian prime minister, has activated a law for banning fi'awi (small groups) protests and strikes, claiming that these forms of opposition are counter-revolutionary and that they harm the Egyptian economy and national security⁶. The Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights published a report claiming that the labor protests in 2012 are five times more than in the 2000s⁷. This rise in workers' struggles is not accidental. The rising prices of basic goods, the swelling of inflation rates and the new forms of precarious labor are among the factors for the workers' discontent.

The accumulation of power by a new “pharaoh”, using neoliberal economic policies that have been adopted by the Muslim Brotherhood can lead to a new social revolt. The destitution that still exists and the poverty that marks 40% in the Egyptian population which generally lives on two dollars per day, will be the focus of the popular politics for a long time. Democratization and social justice, two of the main demands of the people, can lead to a new “social contract”. Many organizations are working with the poor and the marginalized but the leftist parties should multiply their efforts if they want to gain more influence. Finally, what is also at stake is the very important issue of the internalization of democratic processes in the leftist parties. These parties should secure that they adopt more democratic and horizontal policies for their operation, leaving behind any hegemonic or patriarchal spirit or discourse.

NOTES

All links accessed on February 15, 2013

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