Egypt: a social and political tinderbox

Jean Shaoul
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Last week's collision between two trains on a busy route packed with workers travelling into Cairo for work from the poorer northern outskirts of the city has exposed the social and political relations within Egypt today.

At least 58 people were killed and 143 injured in the crash that occurred when a stationary train at Qalyoub station was hit by another travelling at 50 miles an hour, which caught fire after derailing. There were long delays before the emergency services arrived.

If the response of the ambulance and fire services was slow, that of the security forces was not. The government despatched 15 trucks of riot police to the scene in anticipation of the protests and riots by furious passengers and relatives that have erupted at other such disasters. At one point, an angry crowd began accusing the government of negligence and corruption.

The transport minister, Mohammed Mansour, immediately sacked the railways chief executive, suspended his deputy, and announced US$860 million worth of investment in the railways plus another US$600 million in loans and an inquiry into the cause of the crash, in an attempt to deflect criticisms from the government.

The August 21 train crash may have been accidental, but it was neither unexpected nor without cause. Egypt's transport infrastructure is dilapidated, horrendously overcrowded and dangerously unsafe after decades of underinvestment. Signalling systems, which lay at the heart of this accident, are out of date. Third-class carriages are so overcrowded that some passengers even travel in the overhead luggage compartments.

There have been three major train crashes since February. The same month, a ferry sank in the Red Sea killing about 1,000 people in one of the worst accidents at sea in recent years. According to a parliamentary investigation, this was the direct result of flouting the most basic safety precautions and official corruption reaching up to the highest levels. The owner of the ship, Mamdouh Ismail, a government-appointed member of the upper house and the ruling national Democratic party of President Hosni Mubarak, fled the country to escape prosecution. He reportedly had the assistance of top officials concerned that a trial would lead to politically damaging revelations of Ismail's operations and his high-level connections.

By far, the worst rail accident took place just a week earlier when a train caught fire killing at least 373 people because there were no emergency exits in the third-class compartments. Carriages built to take 150 people were holding 300 at the time of the fire.

According to a report released by the Egyptian Ministry of Transport last November, 6,000 people are killed each year as a result of road accidents, with another 30,000 people injured. Egypt has some of the highest road accident rates in the world, and road accident fatalities are the second major cause of avoidable death after heart disease.

The decay of Egypt's limited infrastructure is bound up with the government's implementing of the diktats of the international financial institutions: the privatisation of state-owned enterprises and public land, banking bailouts, slashing taxes for the rich, eliminating nearly all subsidies on basic commodities, and the introduction of user charges for essential public services such as schools and healthcare.

The government has built prestige projects. Dreamland and other opulent suburbs are just minutes away from downtown Cairo via new expressways for the wealthy, and tourist resorts on the Red Sea display levels of wealth few Egyptians could ever experience. A family outing to Dreampark, the amusement park in Dreamland, costs more than a month's average wages.

The state has subsidised the bankers, speculators and property developers, while the army too has taken part in the construction boom, building new luxury enclaves for the officer elite. These projects have come to symbolise the Mubarak regime's economic priorities, with its emphasis on prestigious development projects while the country's poor majority go without jobs, decent transport and their most basic material needs.

While Egypt's economy grew at 6 percent last year, the fastest pace in years, there is little sign of it in the poor suburbs and crowded slums of the capital.

Al Jazeera reports that market traders complain of slow trade and public sector workers say their wages do not support their families, while young boys in Cairo's squalid slums sift through rubbish looking for items such as broken coat hangers for less than a US$1 a day amid the stench of rotting household waste. Eben school teachers take home less than US$2 a day, while soup kitchens have become commonplace.

The official rate of unemployment is 10 percent, but most people believe that it is more than double that. With more than half the 70 million population under the age of 30, 700,000 new jobs are needed every year. Half of all young people are believed to be either unemployed or underemployed, while women are particularly badly affected. The privatisation of state-owned lands in the rural areas has created destitute agrarian workers who have flocked to the cities in search of work.

Rising oil prices have increased the price of fuel and diesel, creating enormous hardship among the poor.

These levels of deprivation and social inequality could only have been accomplished with the backing of the US, which has given Egypt $2 billion a year in military and economic aid, second only to Israel, since the peace deal it struck with Israel in 1979. Such support has been crucial to holding the working class of the most populous Arab country in the region in check by means of the most brutal repression.

Mubarak's regime is little more than a front for the military. His first act on coming to power more than 25 years ago was to declare a state of emergency. It has remained in force ever since, providing the legal basis for arbitrary detention, trials before military and security

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courts, the banning of demonstrations and public rallies, strict press censorship, the routine hounding of journalists, and making it a criminal offence to "engage in political or union activities reserved for political parties or syndicates."

According to Human Rights Watch, about 15,000 people have been kept in long-term detention without trial or even charges being laid against them, while car bomb attacks on tourists since October 2004 have led to additional mass arrests and arbitrary detentions. The Egyptian Organisation of Human Rights (EOHR) reported 292 known torture cases between January 2003 and April 2004, with at least 17 additional cases of death in police or security force custody.

Targets of government repression have not only included the Muslim Brotherhood and other radical Islamists, but leftists, liberal democrats, feminists, gay men, intellectuals, Coptic Christians and human rights activists. Socialist publications and organisations are banned.

The army and security forces, which number nearly a million, act with impunity. A government official told Human Rights Watch that the government had not conducted a single criminal investigation of the security forces for torture or ill-treatment in the past 19 years or imposed any disciplinary measures, despite numerous credible allegations of serious abuse in custody.

But Mubarak's role as one of the US's most important strategic and political allies in the Middle East, far from strengthening the regime, has compounded its isolation from the broad mass of the population.

The US-backed Israeli military assault on Gaza and Lebanon, Washington's intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq along with its "extraordinary rendition" programme are all bitterly opposed by working people, as is Egypt's own role in policing its border with Gaza against the Palestinians.

Mubarak stood by while Israel mounted an air, sea and land blockade, invaded Gaza and destroyed its infrastructure, killed civilians and conducted house-to-house searches, ostensibly seeking the soldier captured by militant oppositionists. He closed Egypt's border with Gaza, leaving the Palestinians no means of escaping from Israel's unrelenting bombardment of their homes and the mounting humanitarian catastrophe.

He had also indirectly condemned Hezbollah's seizure of the two Israeli soldiers, thereby providing crucial cover for Israel's criminal war against Lebanon. Mubarak hoped that if Israel were able to inflict a crushing military defeat on Hezbollah, it would strengthen his position in the region vis-à-vis Iran and Syria, and reduce popular support for Islamists at home. He even refused to take the most elementary diplomatic measure of recalling Egypt's ambassador from Tel Aviv as a sign of protest toward Israeli aggression against Lebanon.

While totally dependent upon US imperialism, too overt an accommodation by the ruling military clique to the White House's diktats threatened a political explosion in a country where social tensions have reached boiling point. The month-long war in Lebanon saw demonstrations and clashes with riot police as protesters demanded the expulsion of Israel's ambassador from Egypt, the recall of Egypt's ambassador from Tel Aviv and the boycott of trade with Israel.

Mubarak made a tactical adaptation, eventually calling for a ceasefire, whilst continuing to blame Hezbollah for Lebanon's misery. He also turned down a US request to host talks on the war in Sharm el Sheik (these were held in Rome instead). Fully cognisant of the fact that the war is not about the destruction of Hezbollah but the complete subjugation of Lebanon and its transformation into a US-Israeli protectorate, Mubarak refused to mount any challenge to the US-Israeli proposals to send an international force to police southern Lebanon and disarm Hezbollah, although he did refuse to participate in such a force.

There are indications that the massive opposition to the war is beginning to coalesce with social and political demands that fundamentally threaten not only Mubarak but the entire Arab bourgeoisie.

Thus far, this has found only partial and distorted expression.

The largest opposition group, the illegal but semi-tolerated Muslim Brotherhood, made electoral gains in the elections last year on the basis of its anti-corruption campaign and its provision of welfare services that form a vital safety net for millions of workers and their families.

In the last few years, the regime had begun to relax its restrictions on the Brotherhood in attempt to shore up its own Islamic credentials and outflank its opponents. This has proven something of a double-edged sword. When the Brotherhood seemed set to make a strong showing in the local elections, Mubarak postponed them so as to preempt an electoral disaster for his own National Democratic Party and prevent the Brotherhood from qualifying to run its own candidate for the next presidential election.

However, the Muslim Brotherhood has a long history of opposing workers' struggles and has extensive investments of its own in land and property and supports the broad thrust of Mubarak's economic policies and his emphasis on the free market.

None of the liberal opposition parties such as the Wafd and the Ghad, whose leader Aymain Nour is in jail on trumped-up fraud charges, have a mass base. They all espouse similar economic policies, and all seek to curry favour with the Bush administration.

The Kifaya organisation formed in 2004 and made up of liberals, Islamists, ex-Stalinists and Nasserists, has tried to jump on the so-called democratic "colour" revolutions of Ukraine and Georgia, which were backed by the US.

This only underscores the bankruptcy of Mubarak's ostensible opponents. For the US policy of "regime change" carried out in the former Soviet republics, as with that implemented in Afghanistan and Iraq, has nothing to do with establishing democracy but rather with consolidating the geopolitical domination of US imperialism across the world. And in Egypt, as elsewhere, its target would be the working class and poor.

A progressive solution to war and oppression can only be found through the development of an independent political movement aimed at the creation of a United Socialist States of the Middle East. This would remove the artificial boundaries imposed by imperialism and enable the valuable resources of the region to be used for the benefit its peoples.

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