

The Egyptian Revolution, the Muslim Brotherhood and the apologetics of the Revolutionary Socialists

Part 1

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5 January 2012

Nine months after the fall of Hosni Mubarak, Islamist parties secured a majority in the first two rounds of Egypt's parliamentary elections.

With a working class and rural poor more numerous than the rest of the Middle East, aside from Iran and Turkey, Egypt is by far the most important and influential country in the region. The powerful movement of the Egyptian people that brought down Mubarak was therefore an enormous blow to US imperialism and its regional allies.

Despite this, Egypt remains a dictatorship under which workers face poverty wages and political oppression. The movement that began the "Arab Spring" is being hijacked and perverted by the ruling elite, primarily by resort to an alliance with Islamist parties that have worked systematically to defend the ruling military junta and, secondly, the nominally "democratic" and left parties that block any political struggle by the working class to overthrow the junta.

The elections are a fraud designed to legitimise Egypt's continued domination by a handful of billionaires, the military, the transnational banks and corporations. They will formally hand over power to parties sidelined by the revolutionary upsurge of workers and youth that toppled Mubarak in February. These parties are hostile to the revolution's basic demands: social equality, better living standards, and political freedom.

On a low turnout of just over 50 percent in the first round and 42 percent in the second round, the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) obtained about 40 percent of the vote, the Salafists' Al-Nour 24 percent of the vote, the liberal Egyptian Bloc and Al Wafd parties 14 and 11 percent of the vote. The Revolution Continues bloc of middle class ex-left and youth parties received just four percent.

The ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) has ensured that it will control political life in Egypt, reserving the power to appoint four-fifths of the delegates to a constituent assembly and veto any part of the new constitution. It has kept in place the full apparatus of repression and torture developed under Mubarak, outlawing strikes and protests and arresting and trying over 12,000 people in military tribunals over the last nine months.

According to the SCAF's 2011 Constitutional Declaration, the junta will retain power to promulgate or object to legislation, to issue public policy for the state and the public budget, appoint members of the People's Assembly, call and adjourn its sessions and sign international treaties and represent the Egyptian state abroad.

The junta intends to establish a working partnership with the now-dominant party in the parliament, the Muslim Brotherhood. Its leader Mohammed Badie has courted the generals, posing as a moderate party in contrast to the more extreme Salafist al-Nour party. He has promised to

work with the junta, declaring: "We must live in harmony not only with the military council, but with all of Egypt's factions, or else the conclusion is zero. There will be reconciliation between the three powers: the parliament, the government, and the military ruling council."

Moreover, there are signs that the Brotherhood would be willing to protect the special role of the military in order to reach a deal with the generals. According to the privately owned Egyptian daily *Al-Tahrir*, Essam Al-Erian, the vice chairman of the FJP, announced that "the military has the right to enjoy a special position in the upcoming constitution, more than in previous ones." He also stated that the transfer of power to an elected civilian authority "should not result in the disappearance of the junta from the political scene".

Formed in 1928, the Brotherhood represents a powerful faction of the Egyptian bourgeoisie. Its founder, Hanna al-Banna, developed the idea that a Sunni-based Islamism could be fashioned as a bulwark against Western influence, an alternative to the secular nationalism of the main bourgeois Wafd party, and above all as a weapon against the rise of communism after the Russian Revolution. He called for an Islamic state based on Sharia law and advocated corporatism and paternalism on the part of the landowners and employers, as a counterweight to the class struggle.

The Brothers used religious sectarianism and anti-Semitism to combat the growing influence of the socialist and communist left—many of whom were Jewish—within the national movement, and to divide the working class. This was particularly evident in the ethnically diverse industrial city of Alexandria, where it built up a network of paramilitary groups that became notorious for their attacks on workers and secularists.

The Brotherhood married nationalism and religion with a reactionary social programme. While women would be educated and allowed to work, they would be kept separate from men. Religion would be at the core of social and economic life. To this end, the Brotherhood set up a network of schools, clinics, factories and mosques.

A party with such a programme and origins is incapable of resolving the deep going social problems that confront Egypt today. The Islamists, despite their anti-imperialist rhetoric, are in fact being courted by the Obama administration. They have become a key instrument of US foreign policy in the Middle East—most recently in the NATO war in Libya and the ongoing civil war in Syria—and beyond. Not the least of their merits, from Washington's perspective, is their role in whipping up sectarianism to divide the working class.

A key element in the electoral rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt after the fall of Mubarak is the support they have received from nominally left parties, such as the Tagammu and Karama, the various Stalinist

groups, including the Egyptian Communist Party which is largely integrated into Tagammu, and above all the Revolutionary Socialists (RS).

The RS are affiliated internationally with parties of the International Socialist Tendency, including the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in Britain, and unofficially with the International Socialist Organization (ISO) in the United States. Their specific role has been to provide a fake Trotskyist benediction for the Brotherhood, describing the subordination of the working class to the Islamists, “democrats” and other factions of the bourgeoisie as a “united front” and even as an application of Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution.

In reality, everything the RS does is a repudiation of the policies historically advanced by Trotsky’s Fourth International, which the International Socialists broke with in 1950.

The Theory of Permanent Revolution demonstrates that the Egyptian people cannot achieve any of their most basic needs—freedom from imperialist oppression, democratic rights, jobs, and social equality—by aligning with any section of the national bourgeoisie. In the imperialist epoch, the realization of the basic democratic and national tasks in the oppressed nations—tasks associated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the rise of the bourgeoisie—posed the taking of power by the working class. This in turn could be achieved only as part of the struggle for world socialist revolution, to place all the resources of the national and international economy under the control of the workers and oppressed masses.

The IST and its RS offshoot repudiated this perspective long ago, asserting that the national bourgeoisie could realise independence from imperialism and develop a viable and essentially independent economy based upon capitalist property relations and state regulation. Rejecting any possibility of socialism for decades to come, the IST instead advances a perspective historically associated with Stalinism—the advocacy of alliances with the parties of the bourgeoisie in order to achieve limited democratic reforms.

The RS enjoys particularly close relations with the younger supposedly “reform” wing of the Brotherhood, which it lauds. Despite the Brothers’ hostility to the working class and support for capitalism, the RS have followed in the footsteps of their sister organisation, the British SWP, in boosting them.

From the late 1990s, the SWP began to collaborate with the group, utilising its opposition to US air strikes on Iraq and support for the Palestinians’ intifada, the uprising that followed Ariel Sharon’s provocative march into the Al Aqsa mosque compound in September 2000. The SWP justified this alliance with the slogan, advanced by Chris Harman in his *The Prophet and the Proletariat*, “Sometimes with the Islamists, never with the state.”

The anti-war movement that emerged in 2001 against US-led wars in Afghanistan and then Iraq provided the political vehicle to cement relations with the Islamists, not just in Egypt but internationally, and bring the SWP firmly into mainstream politics—particularly in the Middle East. In the process, it provided the SWP with access to substantial funds.

The Stop the War Coalition (STWC), made up of the SWP, the Muslim Association of Britain, the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and a number of smaller pseudo-left parties, participated in the Egyptian anti-war conferences held annually in Cairo from 2002 to 2008.

The Brothers and other Islamist parties were the predominant political tendency. Having formed a political alliance with antiwar Labour MP George Galloway in the Respect coalition, the SWP joined him in soliciting monies from various Muslim businessmen. In return, the SWP and its affiliates such as RS lauded uncritically the role of the Hamas in Gaza and the Hezbollah in Lebanon in “resisting” imperialism—keeping quiet about the sectarian strife the Islamists whipped up to divide the working class in Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria.

The SWP and STWC’s agenda was wholly in line with bourgeois interests in the Middle East. They sought to dragoon the antiwar movement behind support for German and French imperialism, who wanted to revive the United Nations as a vehicle to restrain American militarism.

The Cairo anti-war conferences were held alongside the Social Forum movement conference, which the Islamists also dominated. The participation of the SWP, RS and similar groups gave political cover for the pro-capitalist, anti-working class programme of the Islamists.

The RS set up the National Alliance for Change in June 2005 to coordinate joint protests with the Brotherhood and the FSU in November 2005. It boasted that “the places where the FSU operates have witnessed another great improvement between the Brothers and the radical left”.

The RS justified their rapprochement with the claim that the Brotherhood’s composition and character had changed, due to the emergence of a younger, more pragmatic and liberal layer.

These “reform” layers are in reality a section of the bourgeoisie that finds more overt religious symbols and ideology an obstacle to closer relations with Washington and the international financial elite. They advance as their model the Justice and Development Party (AKP) of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. They are wholly indifferent to the desperate social conditions in Turkey the AKP presides over on behalf of the business elite, its brutal assault on the Kurdish population in Turkey and Iraq, and its detention of journalists, human rights activists and political opponents.

The ISO in America boasted of the role of the RS in assembling another coalition of liberal and Islamic forces in 2006, saying: “It has to be said that the alliance might have been quite difficult to maintain if the left had taken the sectarian attitudes of some of the older layers of Marxists, who basically maintained that the Brothers were a tool of the capitalist class, simply an ally of neo-liberalism, and so on. *The Revolutionary Socialists played a key role in overcoming that*” [emphasis added].

To be continued



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