

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

Part 2

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This is the second in a three part article on the political apologetics extended by the Revolutionary Socialists for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The first part was published on Thursday, January 5.

The 1952 Free Officers' Coup

To refute the claims of the Revolutionary Socialists as to the Muslim Brotherhood's supposedly "progressive" and left-leaning character, it is worth examining the political and social forces that brought the military to power in 1952. This provides many striking parallels with events today, not least the role of the type of Popular Frontism now advanced by the RS in blocking the working class from intervening independently in a revolutionary situation.

Egypt, like many colonial and semi-colonial countries, was in political ferment after World War II. Its economy had collapsed and almost all social layers sought to throw off the yoke of British imperialism, which continued to rule Egypt via its puppet, King Farouk and which, together with France, owned and controlled the Suez Canal, Egypt's major source of income and employment.

In government, the secular bourgeois nationalist Wafd—which had led the national movement since the 1919 uprising against the British and had put down the working class uprising in Alexandria in 1924—proved incapable of implementing serious social reform. This led to mass strikes, demonstrations, political unrest and instability that posed the question of the working class taking power.

But the Stalinist bureaucracy's betrayal of world socialist revolution under the fraudulent guise of building "socialism in one country" was to prevent this possibility from being realised.

Following the collapse of the Hitler-Stalin pact and Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, having joined forces with Britain and the Allied Powers, Stalin ordered Communist Party members to drop their support for anti-colonial movements that saw the war as opportunity to throw out the British. The Soviet Union's later support for the partition of Palestine and the establishment of Israel was met with anger throughout the Arab world.

Within Egypt, the Communist Party, and its various offshoots, had in the 1930s swung between an ultra-left perspective and an embrace of bourgeois parties in a Popular Front. On occasions, they courted the Islamists as revolutionaries until they were attacked by them, when they

called them fascists.

Despite this, the Democratic Movement for National Liberation (DMNL), formed by the Egyptian Communist movement in 1947, still enjoyed considerable support. But while claiming to be "the fighting organisation of the working class," it stressed that it defended the interests of "all classes and all patriotic groups of the nation". It adopted Stalin's "two-stage" theory that insisted that in colonial and semi-colonial countries such as Egypt, the struggle for socialism had first to pass through the stage of "democratic capitalism".

During the social upheavals of 1948-54, the DMNL argued that the revolutionary strivings of the masses had to be suppressed and subordinated to a "popular" and "national" front with the Wafd and the Muslim Brotherhood. The struggle for socialism could only begin after the bourgeois democratic revolution had triumphed.

The supporters of the Fourth International in Egypt fought against this line, but were among the first to be arrested and suppressed.

As the Wafd collapsed, broader layers of the bourgeoisie switched to the Muslim Brotherhood as a means of combating communist influence in the working class. The King called upon the army to put down the working class, but the army was seething with discontent over its defeat in Palestine. In 1949, sections inside the army had formed the Free Officers Movement. Many were influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood, including Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser; future President Anwar Sadat was a member of the organisation.

The Free Officers feared that political opposition to King Farouk would lead to a socialist revolution. They mounted a pre-emptive strike under the banner of Egyptian nationalism and sent Farouk packing. They installed General Muhammad Naguib as President of their junta, the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC).

On taking power, the RCC suppressed strikes and demonstrations by textile workers in Alexandria. The strike leaders were hung on the factory grounds, as a message that the RCC would not tolerate any independent action by the working class.

By the time the DMNL opposed Naguib's regime, it had lost much of its influence in the workers' movement. The political vacuum this created ultimately led to the victory in 1954 of Nasser in a power struggle against Naguib. Nasser proceeded to outlaw all political parties including the DMNL, the Communist and Socialist parties and the Wafd, jailing the Stalinist leaders and severely circumscribing the trade unions.

Only the Muslim Brotherhood escaped the political ban. The Brotherhood's leaders were at first supportive of the Free Officers coup in 1952 and worked to promote support for the military. Only when Nasser insisted upon a secular constitution did the Brothers turn against the

military and attempt to assassinate Nasser, who outlawed the group in December 1954.

For many years, the Brotherhood went into political decline as movements such as Nasser's were able to utilise the Cold War conflict between the Soviet Union and US imperialism to secure a degree of apparent independence and to pursue policies that lent them an anti-imperialist coloration. In Egypt this included the overthrow of the monarchy, the removal of British troops, the nationalisation of the Suez Canal, and Britain and France's forced pull-out from Suez in 1956. This inaugurated a period of economic and social reforms, including the limited secularisation of the state and break-up of the large estates, the nationalisation of basic industry, and the development of education, basic infrastructure and social services.

Islamism's re-emergence

The 1970s saw a political re-emergence of Islamist groups, including the Brotherhood, who were to benefit from the determined reorientation of the Egyptian bourgeoisie towards an accommodation with US imperialism. The signing of the Camp David Accords and recognition of Israel in 1978 marked an end to Egyptian pretensions to advance a Pan-Arab and even socialist alternative for the Middle East.

The political vacuum created by the Stalinists' insistence that the working class had no independent political role to play allowed the Islamists to dominate anti-imperialist movements throughout the Middle East. Popular support for Islamic groups grew, particularly among the most impoverished layers and the rural poor.

The deposing of the Shah's tyrannical regime in Iran and the 1979 revolution inspired and promoted a network of Shi'ite groups, including Amal and Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shi'ite opposition elements to the Iraqi regime, and Shi'ite minorities in the Gulf States.

Washington's regional ally Saudi Arabia responded by helping promote Sunni groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood. The ruling elite in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States poured money into both the Brotherhood and Salafists, who adhere to a form of Islam closer to Saudi Wahhabism, to counter and suppress progressive political tendencies in the working class. They invested in businesses in Egypt and throughout the Middle East and set up banks and financial institutions in Egypt, London and Geneva. Islamic finance was crucial in bringing together wealthy businessmen, political Islamists and Islamic scholars. Riyadh provided aid to governments, along with stringent conditions on economic reforms.

Washington supported the growth of Sunni movements as a counter to Moscow's influence, as a political weapon against Iran or radical nationalists such as the Ba'ath Parties in Syria and Iraq considered to be pro-Soviet, and as an explicitly anti-Communist force to disorient the oppressed masses with radical-sounding rhetoric.

From 1980-89, the CIA provided the largest covert aid programme in US history to Afghanistan in order to destabilise the Soviet Union. It financed and armed the most extreme mujahidin groups, including Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda network, fighting the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul. Similarly, the Jordanian monarchy encouraged the Brotherhood and mobilised them against the Palestine Liberation Organisation in Black September 1970. Israel also helped the Brotherhood establish itself in Gaza and the West Bank to counter the PLO. The Brothers were later to provide the basis of Hamas. Jordan and Israel supported the Syrian Brotherhood in their civil war against the Ba'athist regime from 1976 to 1982.

Within Egypt, in line with his realignment with Washington, President Anwar Sadat sought to open up the economy to free-market reforms and

encourage foreign investment. This led to a rapid decline in living standards for the broad mass of the population, while spawning a new business elite, many of whom were aligned with or sympathetic to the Brotherhood.

It was estimated that, by the 1980s, as much as 40 percent of private businesses were linked to the group—chiefly in real estate and foreign currency speculation. Many of the emerging Islamic business class invested in banking and finance, setting up investment firms based on Gulf oil money. The new Islamic business class also included the small and medium size businesses, merchants, manufacturers and labour contractors.

With estimates that the military controls up to 40 percent of the economy, these two groups constitute the bulk of the Egyptian bourgeoisie.

In 1980 Sadat also amended the constitution to acknowledge Sharia as a main source of law. He recruited Muslim Brothers and Islamic student activists and used them to gain the leadership of the student movements. As well as a re-emerged Muslim Brotherhood, other Islamic groups emerged such as the Salafist groups around *al-Dawa* (the Call) and groups like *al-Gama'a al-Islamiya*.

The Muslim Brotherhood remained illegal under the constitution, but it was allowed to operate as long as it concentrated on the provision of social welfare attached to the mosques. This assumed ever-greater importance as the masses sank into poverty. With all legal opposition parties severely circumscribed, support for Islamist groups began to grow as the only existing opposition to the regime.

The US attitude towards Islamic tendencies changed after they began to cut across the strategic interests of Washington and its regional allies. In November 1979, a group of militant Islamists took over the Grand Mosque in Mecca in an uprising that was brutally suppressed by the Saudi regime. Over the next few years, several Shi'ite militias held US personnel and other Westerners as hostages, while Hezbollah launched raids against Israeli troops in occupied south Lebanon. Islamic Jihad also destroyed the US Embassy in Lebanon in 1983. In October, another suicide mission destroyed the US Marine Corps barracks, forcing the withdrawal of a US military detachment there in 1984.

In Egypt the Brotherhood spawned small groups calling for an armed uprising against the Sadat government. In September 1981, Sadat ordered a crackdown on political opposition. Shortly afterwards he was assassinated by Islamic Jihad, which opposed Egypt's peace treaty with Israel. Between the late 1970s and 2000, militant Islamists carried out over 700 attacks in Egypt, particularly economic targets and on Christian Copts, killing over 2,000 people.

The Brotherhood was still given significant leeway, however. It was not allowed to officially stand candidates in elections, but Brotherhood-backed candidates could stand as "independents". By the early 1990s, in an alliance with the Islamic Labour Party, it had achieved some success in local elections. The regime of President Hosni Mubarak responded with a bloody crackdown, with mass arrests, jailing and torture.

By the end of the 1990s, the Brotherhood began to fashion itself as a political party, issuing a draft manifesto and consistently outperformed the legal opposition parties in elections. In the 2005 elections, it was virtually the sole organised opposition party to Mubarak's ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), winning 88 seats, about one fifth of the parliament. The government arrested thousands of its members, trying many in military courts. It amended the constitution to prevent independents from running for Parliament, making it impossible for the Brotherhood to stand in November 2010 elections characterised by massive fraud.

To be continued



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