

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

Part 3

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This is the conclusion of 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, and the second part on January 6.

The Brotherhood and the revolutionary developments of 2011

Despite the persecution it suffered, the Muslim Brotherhood continued to seek accommodation with the Mubarak regime, not its overthrow. When mass demonstrations began last January, the Brothers and other Islamist groups refused to come out against the junta. Only at the end of January, as it became clear that Mubarak could not survive, did the Brothers come forward—with the goal of helping to prop up the political order.

The Obama administration was working behind the scenes to shore up the military and intelligence apparatus, forcing Mubarak to appoint Omar Suleiman, the intelligence chief and former general, as vice president. It also began to prepare for a political alternative to Mubarak, should his removal become necessary. One candidate for the job was Mohamed ElBaradei, the former head of the United Nations nuclear watchdog, who had returned to Egypt from his home in Vienna for the express purpose of preventing the protests from getting out of hand.

Either way, Washington could retain control of the situation only with the help of the Brotherhood, which led the only political party with significant support. The White House initiated contact with the Brothers, who were equally keen to work with Washington. One leader said publicly in an interview with *NBC News* that they could “work with the US”. They promised not to stand a candidate in any presidential elections and agreed to back ElBaradei.

The Revolutionary Socialists played a key political role for the Obama administration in this endeavour. Their promotion of the Islamists as allies in the struggle for “social justice” dovetailed with the needs of US imperialism.

When Suleiman announced that he would meet with representatives of oppositional groups February 6 to find a way out of the crisis, he included the Brothers, the Wafd, Tagammu, members of a committee chosen by youth groups and various political and business figures.

The RS presented the Brothers as a reformist and progressive tendency.

They published its statement urging the political parties to “take all political and national forces into this dialogue” with the regime. The RS sought to corral workers behind the Brothers and other capitalist parties by calling for the “formation of leadership represented by the various national forces”, which they described as “a United Front of a special type”.

Exploiting and misappropriating terminology associated historically with Trotsky’s call for a United Front between Germany’s Social Democratic Party and Communist Party, both parties with a mass working class base, to oppose the Nazis, the RS formed an alliance with the Muslim Brothers even as they broke up the popular committees set up to defend neighbourhoods against raids by Mubarak’s thugs.

Their aim was to stifle the development of genuinely popular organisations and place workers under the control of the “national forces” of the Muslim Brotherhood, ElBaradei and his ilk, and the trade union bureaucracy. The RS championed the creation of a “supreme council” that “includes people who are trusted, regardless of their colour in the political spectrum, who are able to defend the interests of their council well.” They insisted that it was “better to speak to protesters with a cadre”—that is, experienced operatives of the Brotherhood and company.

On February 11, Mubarak was replaced by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) junta, led by Defence Minister Mohamed Hussein Tantawi. Two days later, Tantawi dissolved parliament, suspended the constitution and granted the junta dictatorial powers.

The junta claimed that it would oversee a transition to democratic, civilian rule and scheduled a referendum for March 19 on a new constitution. The sham of its democratic pretensions was evidenced by its demands for strikes and protests to stop, and threats to invoke martial law. The Brotherhood supported the military junta’s March referendum, which legalised it as a political party and proposed parliamentary elections in November.

While the RS and other non-Islamist opposition groups formally called for a no vote on the junta’s constitution, they did not break with the Brothers. Instead, on February 25, the RS issued a joint statement, “Towards the Foundation of a Workers’ Coalition of the January 25 Revolution” proposing an alliance between “left forces” and the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Islamists mobilised their supporters and the constitutional referendum passed on March 19, with 77 percent of the vote on a low turnout.

In May, the Salafists formed the leading contingent in an anti-Christian demonstration that led to sectarian fighting in which at least a dozen people died and 240 were wounded, including 65 who were shot. The

attack was green-lighted by the junta as a means of whipping up sectarian strife to divide the working class and provide the military an excuse for a clamp down on popular protests.

Mass protests grew throughout the summer, and workers and youth began to raise the call for a “second revolution” to overthrow the junta. Washington responded by announcing it would establish an “open dialogue” with the Muslim Brotherhood. Saudi Arabia sponsored the Salafist groups as its proxies. Together, the Islamists, including Al-Gama’a al-Islamiya—a fascistic party—accused the protesters in Tahrir Square of being “communists and secularists who want to hijack political power by fomenting strife between the people and the army.” Different Islamist groups worked on establishing a common platform and called for a “pro-stability protest” on July 29.

Still, the Islamists continued to receive vital help from the liberals and pseudo-left groups.

The RS denounced a second revolution, declaring ludicrously, “Not a second revolution but a permanent revolution until the fall of the regime...”

This attempt to counterpose demands for a second revolution to Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution was thoroughly dishonest. The struggle for permanent revolution can only be realised through a second revolution by the working class to overthrow the junta. For the RS, the real aim was to sanction the continued domination of the bourgeois forces supporting the junta by making their dictatorship “permanent”.

On July 27 the RS, the Democratic Workers Party and the Socialist Alliance Party joined the United Popular Front and signed a statement with all major political groups in Egypt, including the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafists and al-Gama’a al-Islamiya. They agreed to leave all “controversial issues” aside. The Islamists responded by mobilising their supporters to a rally called by the United Popular Front, far outnumbering the liberal and “left” groups. The biggest contingents came from the Salafist al-Nour (The Light) Party and the Muslim Brotherhood. They called for an Islamic state and chanted against “secularism” and “communism”.

The RS and other pseudo-left parties feigned shock and outrage, announcing on July 31 that they would no longer take part in the on-going Tahrir Square sit-in. This paved the way for the army to use lethal force to clear the Square.

The RS has also promoted the Muslim Brotherhood within the so-called independent trade unions. After a wave of mass strikes broke out in September, these organisations called them off to prevent demands for the overthrow of the SCAF threatening bourgeois rule. These “independent” unions are in fact backed by the US State Department through the fervently anti-communist AFL-CIO. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told Egyptian activists, “We gave grants that the government did not like to support unions organizing on behalf of the political opposition to the regime... what we hoped for is what happened”.

The RS are anxious to get on board the gravy train provided by the AFL-CIO in Egypt.

As popular hostility to the SCAF mounted, on October 2, 13 political parties, including the Freedom and Justice Party (the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood), the Salafist al-Nour Party, the Wafd and the Nasserite Karama Party, signed an agreement to parliamentary elections in November, praising them as an important step towards democracy. This was done even though the military will keep power at least until the end of 2012, overturning initial pledges to stand down after six months. According to *Al Ahram Online*, the signatories of the document “also declared their full support for the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and their appreciation of its role in protecting the revolution and its process of transferring power to the people.”

This rotten agreement has helped the SCAF to tighten its grip on power, step up repression and violent attacks on workers and extend the emergency laws.

Renewed mass protests have laid bare the huge gap between the working class and the entire political establishment. The Brotherhood publicly criticized the anti-junta protests, leading protestors to eject Mohamed El Beltagi, the Muslim Brotherhood leader, from Tahrir Square. In the run-up to the elections there were mass protests, triggered by the junta’s violent crackdown on November 19 against families of martyrs of the revolution, during which security forces killed over 40. Demonstrations in cities throughout the country demanded the overthrow of the SCAF.

Under these conditions, a number of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois political figures and organizations, including ElBaradei, called for a “national salvation government.” The Islamists endorsed this demand. Such a government, installed by the same Egyptian military command that has carried out the bloody repression, would have as its central task the strangling of the independent struggles of the working class, supposedly in the name of preserving the unity of the “revolution.” But in the short term, it again handed political initiative to the junta. It enabled the Islamists to dominate the elections in the face of a hopelessly compromised liberal opposition and its pseudo-left appendages.

In the final analysis, the growth of political Islam in Egypt and internationally is the price that the working class has paid for its subordination to the various national bourgeois organisations that were organically incapable of leading any independent struggle against imperialism along a progressive and democratic route.

Nationalism, secular or religious, serves only to divide the working class from their international brothers and sisters and subordinate it to the interests of capitalism. This, coupled with the ideological confusion and political disorientation created by the betrayals of first the Stalinists and latterly the RS and other ex-left groups, prevents the working class from adopting an effective means of struggle against their own ruling class and imperialism.

The RS perspective of working with the Islamists and pushing for “democratic space” under the junta poses enormous dangers. The formation of a parliament dominated by the Brothers, al-Nour and the liberals sets the stage for explosive new struggles between the junta and its imperialist backers—now supported by Egypt’s official “opposition” parties—and the working class.

The demands for social equality and genuine democratic rights can be won only through a conscious revolutionary struggle of workers and peasants against the junta and its defenders, from the right and nominal left. It means building a mass movement aimed at bringing a workers’ government to power.

To conduct this struggle, Egyptian workers need two things: an international socialist strategy and their own independent fighting organisations. The way forward lies in the fight to unite Egyptian workers and the rural poor with their brothers and sisters throughout the region in a combined struggle against capitalist exploitation and imperialist oppression, for the United Socialist States of the Middle East, as part of a struggle for world socialist revolution. This requires the building of the revolutionary leadership of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Concluded



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