

Social Protests in Egypt before and after the 25 January Revolution: Perspectives on the Evolution of their Forms and Features

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The 25 January Egyptian revolution that was triggered under the slogan “Bread, Freedom and Human Dignity” (*Eish, horeya, karama insaneya*) came just after a decade of two principal waves of protest movements that invaded the country, changing its political map and introducing new social pressures. These protest cycles were divided into two main categories. The first cycle was purely political, it lasted from 2004 till 2006 and was embodied by the creation of the Egyptian Movement for Change called *Kefaya* (Enough). It expressed itself through several waves of large street demonstrations with the rallying slogan: “*La lel tamdid, la lel Thawris*”, which meant: “No to the continuation [of Mubarak rule] and No to the inheritance [of authority by his son].” Despite the movement’s inspiring and innovative appearance, it was largely elitist and therefore failed to acquire a significant social base. So, it came of no surprise to see the emergence of a second cycle of protests that began in 2005-2006, which were mainly of a social nature. These protests were strictly related to certain sectors or categories within Egyptian society, such as workers, civil servants, teachers, bus drivers, etc. They were simply expressing demands of an economic and financial nature (such as increased social welfare and wages), which were becoming all the more pressing with the policies of increased economic liberalisation. This cycle actually began with The Misr Spinning and Weaving Company located in the industrial city of El Mahalla El-Kobra, north of Cairo. A massive strike was staged which brought 24,000

workers to a halt for three consecutive days. Lively protests with chants, drums and placards communicated the strikers’ determination to the authorities. Workers gathered shouting: “Two months, two months!” (In reference to the two months of bonus wages they should have received but did not). These strikes were renewed in the company in 2007 and 2008. This mobilisation of labour has had a domino effect on social protests, which have increased dramatically from 2006 until 2010. The snowballing protests spread from factory to factory, mill to mill, one here, another there, until they practically became a general phenomenon in Egypt. The number of social mobilisations has increased from 266 in 2006, to 614 in 2007, and to 630 in 2008. In 2009, we witnessed around 609 protests.

After the explosion of the 25 January uprising, the social protests did not falter; on the contrary they have increased at a greater rate than before. On some days, nearly 200 of these protests have been recorded. From 12 to 14 February (following President Mubarak’s resignation on 11 February) there were between 40 to 60 protests per day, which took place in different regions across the country. In the above-described framework, this article attempts to answer the following question: How has the changing political context following 25 January influenced the features and the form of social protests in Egypt?

In order to answer this question, this paper is divided into three main parts:

- The first part emphasises the features of social protest movements in the last five years prior to the Revolution and which have emerged out of the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), although hostile to their interests. It demonstrates that those movements, due to the political context, were only focused on economic demands.

They were highly depoliticised since they refused to be linked to political forces with an agenda different from theirs. Moreover, they were very isolated from each other. This part proves that, to some extent, those features formed part of the survival strategy of these movements in the context of the Mubarak regime.

- The second part analyses the form their explosion took during the 25 January events, focusing on the developments within the protests.
- The third part looks at the evolution of the social protests in the context of the political changes the country witnessed after 25 January. On the one hand it shows that they are no longer completely isolated from political forces, with which they now share the same objective: achieving the goals of the revolution. On the other hand, it demonstrates that social protests are beginning to take the shape of “institutions” rather than “movements,” through the foundation of new trade unions that are independent of the official syndicate ETUF. Although previously isolated, today they are trying to regroup into a new trade union federation.

Social Protests Before 25 January (2005-2011): The Dominance of a Category/ Economy-Oriented Logic?

Social protests had three major features that were directly influenced by the political context they emerged in:

1. Emergence from any Institutional Framework (e.g. the Egyptian Trade Union Federation)

None of the social protests that erupted from 2005 to 2006 were organised through a trade union organisation. The Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) – the official trade union Federation – has even aggressively criticised those social protests, taking a clear pro-government position. This was obvious during the negotiations that were held with the Mahalla workers in September 2007, to end their strike. The workers were negotiating their demands with a government delegation that included the ETUF President. This reaction actually proved that the ETUF acted as a representative of the interests of the Egyptian regime and not those of the workers.

Although the regime could tolerate their economic demands, it could not tolerate those claims turning into political demands. These were the rules of the game

2. Anti-politicisation

Social protest movements focused on micro-economic social demands that never went beyond financial rights, improvement of work conditions, and the provision of proper healthcare, etc. In other words, none of the protest movements had any political dimension. Moreover, they never aimed to change the overall political equation. Their main strategy was to put pressure on the government to achieve their economic demands without opposing the regime’s overall economic policies. This was due to three main reasons:

- a. **The Mubarak Regime Strategy:** Mubarak’s regime established a clear separation between what could be described as the social and political spheres. It considered any link between them as a red line that should not be crossed. Political parties were allowed to organise conferences and seminars criticising the regime, but only on the condition that there be no social base. At the same time, workers’ movements were allowed to lay claim to their violated economic rights and vocalise criticisms toward government policies at sit-ins and demonstrations, but in return they were not to cross into social demands, if they wanted to avoid repression. Social protests were well aware of this: although the regime could tolerate their economic demands, it could not tolerate those claims turning into political demands. These were the rules of the game.
- b. **Absence of Linkage between Social Protests and Political Forces:** Labour movements refused categorically to connect with any of the opposition political forces, rejecting any attempt to politicise their demands. It is worth noting that Kamal Abu-Eita the leader of the Tax Collectors Union affiliated to the “*El-Karama*” party took great care to avoid any politicisation

of the “social protest” movement he leads. His famous slogan was: “It doesn’t matter whether or not Mubarak stays in power. What matters for us is our wage increase.” As already mentioned, the regime has managed to impose upon these movements a kind of obliged depoliticisation. However, this assumption is not sufficient for a complete analysis. An alliance between both sides was also absent because of the very absence of the political opposition. Due to their own structural deficiency and anti-democratic attitudes, political parties were weak and unable to establish structural linkage. Consequently, social protest movements found that any alliance with them would not only be meaningless, but also harmful, since the regime would probably react with repression. This was proved by the strike on 6 April 2008, when for the first time, young Egyptian cyber activists tried to call for a nationwide strike in solidarity with the labour strikes in Mahalla, expressing outrage over economic grievances alongside the core political demand: ending authoritarian repression of opposition groups. However, this propaganda not only led to the involvement of the state-security apparatus, who transformed the city into a military barracks, but also urged the ETUF chairman, to force the labour leaders to sign a document in which they agreed to dissolve the strike. In other words, if the labour movement with its economic claims fostered national mobilisation, the latter only stifled the labour demands, since it relied on the latter to achieve a political agenda. The labour movement, therefore, did its best to distance itself from political forces. Its justification was that opposition forces had inappropriately taken advantage of the strike – originally motivated by economic grievances – by converting it into a political demonstration that served the interests of opposition groups, but not the workers themselves.

- c. A Leader’s Style of Social Protest: This political regime has generated a type of leader known as “leadership of services.” Their legitimacy as leaders does not come from their potential to achieve the workers’ demands in the long term, by pushing the regime to establish structural revisions to its economic policies. On the contrary, it comes from their capacity to make promises which can be quickly fulfilled, but with

partial gains for the workers. This is what Sayed Habib one of Mahalla labour leaders has confirmed: “Our role is to achieve our colleagues’ economic demands. A good leader is therefore one who achieves concrete and rapid gains for the workers.” These leaders were clearly able to speak the language of both the regime and the workers. The latter needs only to achieve concrete and rapid material gains, while the regime, for its part, would only accept the economic demands that require no structural revisions. Most of these movement leaders, therefore, seemed to be implicitly allied to the regime, like political parties, to maintain the political status-quo.

3. *The Absence of Structural Linkage between Social Protest Movements*

The social protest movements mostly emerged as isolated islands with no structural connections. Certainly, a number of solidarity strikes with Mahalla workers were held, for example, by other textile workers in *Kafr El-Dawar* and *Tanta* (cities near Mahalla El-Kobra) in September 2007. Nevertheless, these solidarity protests were not the result of the formation of an expanded social movement with structural connections between several labour movements. Since 2008, the increase of the national wage to 1,200 Egyptian pounds was the most significant demand for almost all Egyptian workers.

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However, this was not followed by the building of coalitions between these isolated movements, which could certainly explain their incapacity to force the government to meet this demand. This situation is completely different, for example, from Poland at the end of the seventies, where the structural linkage between a number of labour move-

ments spurred the formation of the famous social movement *Solidarinosc* (Solidarity), which became the motor of change in Poland.

Finally, it is fair to mention that even if social protests were unable to change the government's overall policies, they created a favourable internal dynamic for political change, thereby paving the way for a mass movement to emerge: (i) social protests have created a new group of credible leaders that are representative of the workers and which have succeeded in replacing traditional leaders. This set the scene for the latter's total dismissal following the 25 January Revolution. New trade unions were then formed that are independent from the pro-governmental oriented one; (ii) social protest has succeeded in breaking social taboos, since protests were not only held inside workplaces, but also in front of decision-making organisations such as the Council of Ministers, People's Assembly and the Shura Council; (iii) they spread the belief in the power of coalitions and movements to put pressure on the regime. This was particularly understood by youth movements that – based on this belief – generated the 25 January Revolution.

The 25 January Revolution and the Evolution of Social Protests

The inclusion of social protest in the mass demonstrations of 25 January was a step toward their increased openness. Through the mass movement dynamics they evolved in two major phases.

The First Phase from 25 January to 7 February – Participation on an Individual Basis

The 25 January mass movement was characterised from its beginnings by its popular support, since it involved all sectors of the population, including workers. Undoubtedly, most workers participated in the demonstrations on an individual basis, as normal citizens and not as members of a particular social protest movement. It is worth noting here that workers and employees all demonstrated under the common slogan: "People want to topple the regime," dismissing all other categorical slogans, such as those related to benefits and allowances for certain sectors. However, this situation changed significantly once they returned to work on 8 February, a fact that leads us to the second phase.

The Second Phase from 7 to 11 February – the Civil Disobedience Phase

The second phase started as life had almost gone back to normal on 7 and 8 February when demonstrations decreased and the masses began to leave Cairo's Tahrir Square. However, in that time a number of workers and employees, across many sectors, began to strike, refusing to work until their rights were duly recognised. They organised several protests across the country, which left the economy paralysed, along with the main state facilities, thus evolving into the arena of civil disobedience. With these protests increasing in numbers and spreading geographically, the political scene fully changed in favour of the revolution. According to the *Al-Masry Al-Youm* newspaper, the situation escalated from a few protests on 7 February in several governorates, to 20 protests on 8 February in 9 governorates, to 35 protests on 10 February in 14 governorates, and to 65 protests on 11 February, on the day the President stepped down. The participating sectors in these social protests were widely varied including farmers, employees and workers from different companies and factories in both the private and public sector. The demands were focused on better living conditions, higher wages and salaries and settlements of all unpaid financial debts; all of which were demands that had been made since 2006.

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The prevailing revolutionary spirit has clearly influenced the workers that participated – as mentioned above – "individually", in line with the revolution's dynamics. This was made evident by the slogans used by the Egyptian Telecommunications employees, the driving force of the social protests wave that began on 7 and 8 February. Their slogans began by following a strictly economic logic and then moved towards a more political one. Now, political slogans, similar to those of Tahrir Square, are openly used by the strikers, the most popular being:

“People want the regime to step down.” On 9 February, the public transport drivers followed the same direction during their strike, in which they released a statement declaring their solidarity with the revolutionaries in Tahrir and asking for Mubarak’s departure. On 11 February (the day Mubarak resigned), Cairo and other governorates witnessed a new wave of demonstrations. Hundreds of thousands of Egyptian workers threatened to join the Tahrir demonstrators and declared their full support for the revolution’s demands.

It would be fair to say, therefore, that the engagement of social protest movements in the revolution’s dynamics transformed their strictly economic demands into more political ones increasing their – hitherto partial – influence on the political equation. It cannot be denied, however, that the economic demands were the driving force of their involvement in the mass demonstrations; demands that reflect their need for social justice, one of the revolution’s most central goals.

Social Protests after the 25 January Revolution: Toward a New Framework of Action?

One year after the revolution and since assuming power last February, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) has rarely articulated a clear vision or agenda to deal with Egypt’s deteriorating economic conditions and the demands of its workers. For example, it has still failed to implement the minimum wage limits demanded by workers since 2007. Instead, the old regime’s strategy has prevailed, in which labour demands were treated as a security matter that should be controlled and contained, and not as a social grievance that could best be resolved through creating a new social contract, thereby guaranteeing economic opportunity and a dignified life. The continuation of the Mubarak regime’s heavy-handed approach to the labour movement could be illustrated by the former Prime Minister Essam Sharaf’s government legislation that outlawed the countrywide strikes that followed the revolution. This law has certainly done nothing to suppress the strikes, since repression is never a solution for legitimate grievances.

However, it is important to note that social protests have benefited from the political context’s partial change. The freedom of assembly achieved after 25

January pushed protest movements to evolve toward further institutionalisation, greater coordination and finally toward a closer connection with political forces, as outlined below.

Formation of Independent Trade Unions and the Trade Union Federation

Why have thousands of workers, since 2006, chosen to express themselves through protest movements outside of any institutional framework?

In fact, workers felt that the institution that was supposedly representing their interests under Mubarak’s rule, the state-run Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), was actually defending the interests of the regime. That is why after 25 January, social protest leaders that had solid social bases and sufficient credibility understood the need to institutionalise their movement’s demands. The way forward was the establishment of new trade unions independent from the official one. And these have been formed at lightning speed and right across all sectors of the economy, including farmers, private-sector workers, public transport drivers, employees, etc. Moreover, if the idea of building networks among social protest movements was absent during the old regime, networks today are constantly arising between newly established trade unions. In this climate, union leaders announced Egypt’s first independent federation of trade unions in March 2011: the Egyptian Federation for Independent Trade Unions, established as an independent alternative to the state-controlled ETUF. It currently represents more than 112 new trade unions. The Egyptian Democratic Labour Congress (EDLC), another umbrella group representing around 246 new trade unions, has also been set up.

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However, despite the formation of all these organisations, which genuinely represent the workers, the

draft law that would legalise independent trade unions has not yet been approved by either the SCAF or the Parliament (elected 2 months ago). This vital draft legislation was presented to the cabinet by the Minister of Manpower Ahmed El-Borei almost eight months ago. The legislative body of the cabinet finished discussing it and then submitted it to the SCAF four months ago, but the final legislation has never been issued. These actions are clearly marginalising the labour movement by preventing it from unifying under an independent federation that could represent and negotiate on behalf of workers.

This is a particularly dangerous situation since in periods of transition to democracy a new social contract acceptable to both workers and the state has to be established. It is worth looking to the examples of Spain and Portugal, which during their own democratic transitions witnessed hundreds of social protests similar to those Egypt is seeing today. Unlike Portugal, where sustained demonstrations had a destabilising effect on the transition, Spain's government was able to maintain its legitimacy by negotiating with politicians, parties and trade unions to draw up a plan for managing the economy throughout the transition. By accommodating workers' demands with the consensus agreement known as the "Moncloa Pact," Spain's leaders kept the democratic transition on track. The first step for resolving Egypt's social protest crisis in the Egyptian context could therefore be concretised by the issuance of the new trade union law, as this law would legalise and empower the credible representation that the workers are seeking. The second step would be to negotiate a new social contract with the new trade unions; a new pact that could pave the way for social justice and, at least partially, fulfil social protest demands.

Toward a New Relationship with Political Forces?

A lack of cooperation and even hostility between labour activists and political forces was a characteristic of the Mubarak era, and the regime had every interest in keeping these two opposition blocs divided and weak. This situation is starting to change with social protests and political forces now sharing the same target: to achieve the revolution's goals, even if each side has a different point of view. This new relation between labour and political forces was clearly demonstrated on the day that commemorated the revolution on 25 January 2012. On the

eve of this day, labour movements had embraced calls by youth movements and revolutionary groups calling for demonstrations. The main demand was for an end to the military rule and achieving the revolution's unfulfilled objectives. It is interesting to note that labour activists are among the most frustrated groups in Egypt at present. To date, none of their core demands have been met, foremost among them: a new minimum wage law and the issuing of the long-awaited draft law on trade unions. The Egyptian Federation for Independent Trade Unions has confirmed that many of its member groups will participate in the mass demonstrations. EDLC has explicitly declared its participation in a statement published on its official Facebook page: "Workers with revolutionaries together continue the duties of the revolution."

Watching this new flurry of activity, one can argue that we are indeed watching a new and unprecedented transformation in the relationship between social protests and political forces. To confirm this change let us look back. From 2006 labour movements had categorically refused to coordinate with any of the opposition political forces, resisting efforts to politicise the demands of workers. After all, as mentioned previously, the government was willing to acknowledge and at least pretend to accommodate economic demands, but reacted with repression when it appeared that labour demands had the potential to morph into political ones. The refusal of labour movements to join the political forces' calls for a national strike on the 6 April 2008 confirms this fact.

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In this context, one could say that the calls for a "General strike" and civil disobedience demanding the end of the military rule on 11 February 2012, the anniversary of Mubarak's resignation, produced fertile ground for the relationship between political forces and labour activists. Hence, solidarity between both sides has been confirmed but also mutual respect of the interests of each side

has been advanced as the guarantee of this relation's continuity. In this frame, both EDLC and the Egyptian Federation for Independent Trade Unions council administration declared their symbolic support for youth and political forces' calls for nationwide civil disobedience. However, most unions present under the umbrella of both institutions (the Tax Collectors Trade Union and Tourism Trade Union in the Egyptian Federation for Independent Trade Unions for instance) and refused to join the calls. Only university students went on strike, while most workers reported to their jobs as usual. Workers were thus dissuaded from participating by a simple cost-benefit analysis. Like in the 6 April 2008 strike, on the 11 February 2011 the risk of repression from the military was simply too high compared with the potential payoff of "civil disobedience," which was viewed as unlikely to yield immediate and concrete benefits for workers. Moreover, some sectors, such as the tax collectors, felt that participating in the campaign would do serious damage to Egypt's economy, and were unwilling to take the risk in exchange for the short-term gains and concessions that a strike might bring. Nevertheless, while there are evident similarities between the two strikes, there is one clear difference that was not seen during the Mubarak era, and which establishes the new framework for relations between political forces and social protest: the willingness of the labour leaders to express support for the demands of political groups and recognise that they are sharing common goals. While workers are still resistant to being "used" by revolutionary groups, they are increasingly sympathetic to the latter's cause and view the current undemocratic status quo as politically and economically unsustainable.

Concluding Remarks

- The labour movement's participation in the last days of the revolution was decisive in toppling the Mubarak regime. However, one year after the revolution, the labour movement which had

clearly evolved after the 25 January Revolution in terms of institutionalisation and its relation with political forces, now feels frustrated, since its main demand of social justice, has not yet been fulfilled. The continuation of the same economic policies that neglect social justice concerns will undoubtedly lead to an increase in social protests, particularly in view of that fact that on one hand, right-wing Islamist and civil forces are the ones who are mainly represented in the Parliament and on the other hand, the current government lacks labour representatives who can advocate for the interests of workers through political and institutional channels. In the absence of a clear mechanism for exerting influence over public policy, frustrated labour activists could easily take their demands back to the streets.

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- Egypt desperately needs a new social contract to protect both the political rights of citizens and the economic rights of workers. That is why issuing a new trade union law is now a necessary step toward achieving a representative democracy and social justice. Negotiating the demands of new and legalised trade unions is an urgent step that has to be taken by the authorities in this regard. Any further delay is not only hindering the establishment of this new social contract, but also increasing the strain on Egypt's already fragile economy and jeopardising the success of the transition process as a whole.