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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **The Revolution in Egypt: Rise of the Social Movement**

By Eran Zohar

### **Synopsis**

*The current revolution in Egypt is led mainly by social movements. To understand the failure of the Egyptian regime in cracking down on the protests, examining the organisational profile and pattern of operations of a social movement is necessary.*

### **Commentary**

MANY PEOPLE in academia, media and policymaking circles are busy these days trying to understand and explain the causes of the Egyptian revolution. The popular theories range from poverty and suppression to years of frustration, unfulfilled hopes of a new generation, youth power and many more. They are all correct. Nevertheless, one neglected explanation is the rise of the social movement: the protesters chose to organise themselves as a social movement rather than a political party.

Until the uprising, the Egyptian regime handled traditional local political parties effectively through a mixture of manipulations, changes in the constitution, new rules and regulations, employment of brutal force, and deprivations of human rights. Still, there were some surprises, like the achievements of the Muslim Brotherhood in the parliamentary election in 2005. However, the Mubarak regime managed to develop efficient mechanisms to overcome all these "threats".

### **Unfamiliar Terrain**

In contrast, the story was different in the last weeks of the Mubarak regime because the organisational framework was different. In other words, the regime went to 'war' in unfamiliar surroundings and was drawn into new rules set by the protesters. When it fought the Muslim Brotherhood previously, the rules were clear. The rival was an institutionalised body with a salient leadership, clear hierarchy, homogenous structure, defined ideology and targets, routine patterns of behaviour, and marked borders of membership.

The same cannot be said of the new social movements that have given rise to the protests: The April 6 Youth Movement, founded around 2008, that had organised and led the demonstrations in Egypt, and the Kefaya Movement, founded in 2004, are more complicated. It appears that the traditional tools of suppression employed by the regime and worked remarkably well then were not effective anymore. A deeper analysis reveals the following reasons:

The structure of these social movements is more network-type and flexible with hardly a leadership, or known facilities. Even the political identity of the supporters is heterogeneous and the political agenda very general. The social movements do not have clear aims. For the founders of the April 6 Youth Movement and the Kefaya, this was a clever way to gain a wide range of support from different sections of Egyptian society. Indeed, by this very reason they succeeded in transforming themselves into a mass movement.

In Egypt, like in many other countries, a political party needs a special licence to operate, and the Egyptian regime had used this to suppress any oppositional activity from time to time. However, social movements do not need that. As a result, it becomes harder to accuse people without political identity of illegal political activity, since they mainly call for "peace and freedom".

### **Volunteer Activism**

Basically, the internal dynamic of political parties is driven by interests, and people join political parties to get jobs and benefits. This is less of an issue with social movements where a call for social change is mainly driven by the activists on a volunteer basis. Very often, social movements attract more motivated members than political parties.

In the past there were occasions in which the Egyptian authorities disrupted demonstrations and meetings of the social movements in a brutal way. Some activists were beaten while others were arrested and detained for participating in the activities. Some protesters were immediately dismissed from their jobs. However, some of the counteractions of the regime only consolidated the movements further and helped them create myths which they could identify with. A case in point was the unusual arrest of Asmaa Mahfouz, the Facebook Girl, who organised an online group that supported workers who went on strike in 2008. Since then, she has become a symbol among many young people in Egypt.

There is also a tendency for the media to overestimate the role of the communication networks in the recent success of the protest movement in Egypt. This is not to doubt that the communication networks had been a useful tool for organising demonstrations and avoiding the security state. Rather, it is to point out that the networks serve mainly as facilitators, marketing tools but not actual agents for inciting the protest.

### **Mobilising Power**

What is remarkable about the current protest movement in Egypt is its mobilising power. With a simple but at the same time complicated pattern of operations, the ability to persuade people that change is at hand and therefore they should not be deterred from the brutality of the local police were carefully interwoven into a coherent strategy for mobilisation. Mubarak on the other hand failed to acknowledge this. Not only was he overconfident and arrogant but also insisted in ruling the country as his private property.

He did not pay much attention to the earlier stages when frustration was growing among his people. The distant stand the military forces took, while commended by many, could have averted the situation from escalating. By refraining from interfering in the events, the military had actually assisted the protesters. The Egyptian army is an elite group but when it decided to remain neutral it was seen as having defected passively from the ruling elite in Egypt.

Social movements, like those leading the revolution in Egypt, are not an ideal type; they have weaknesses. They are leaderless, lack resources and more. For the first stage of a revolution these weaknesses are less important than the advantages such as mobilisation capability and self-sacrifice. Now that the Mubarak regime has been removed, the social movements will have to develop new kinds of capabilities to stay relevant. But in the meantime traditional political parties will have to play a more dominant role.

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