# Protest Movements in Egypt: A hope for a fair reform

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After about 10 years of political stagnation in the Egyptian political scene during the 90s of the 20th century, the new millennium brought a new wave of political mobility, which has evolved through the last ten years, creating a unique situation in the modern political history of Egypt; as it is based on a large wave of political and social protest. This paper attempts to follow the evolution of this wave, through the observation of its different stages, based on different criteria, such as: the nature of these protest movements, their main features, their structure, their context (on the economic, internal, and external levels), and the interaction of these movements with its context, especially when it comes to the mutual influence between both these movements and their context. To paint a clearer picture, this paper is also giving an overview of the Egyptian political scene during the 90s, which has been appointed previously as a phase of political stagnation; however it was, as well, a stage of formation for the current mobility in Egypt, through all the incidents and events of this period.

The period of the 90s have witnessed a serious degradation of the classic political organization, or in other words, the classic political parties: the proposals of the new *Wafd* party have regressed, practically all the leftist political forces, on top of which *Al- Tagamo`* (the Assembly) Party, have been assimilated in the state's fight against the violent Jihadi movements. Also, the internal conflicts inside these parties have been breaking out: *Al- `Amal* (Labour) Party, which was in alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood, has been divided and then dissolved; at the same time, the Nasserist Party, considered as the hope for change for many, was living, since its creation, severe internal conflicts over power inside the party. Also, at the same moment, the Jihadi forces have been struck down by the swords of the Egyptian security forces.

Therefore, this period has been characterized by what we can call "the post second Golf War confusion"; as the Egyptian role in this war, and its consequence of cancelling around 50% of the Egyptian external debts, lead to an obvious economic revival, as the regime started using an Nationalist discourse as a pretext for its foreign policy, and to bid the opposition with it. This allowed a certain margin of democracy towards the non- violent political forces, as an opponent to the Jihadi forces on the Egyptian political scene. Consequently, this relatively tolerant environment allowed the Brotherhood to step out of the parties' mantle, and to rebuild their movements independently; also, a number of leftist and Nationalist movements started to form outside the existing, classic frameworks.

The New millennium started with two important regional incidents: the first is the liberation of the occupied southern Lebanon, which represented quite an

inspiration for Arab populations; and the second, is the second *Intifada* (uprising) in Palestine, which had the greatest influence on the Arabic public opinion and the Arab feeling of solidarity. These two incidents triggered social and political mobility in Egypt, starting with demonstration in solidarity with *Al- Intifada*: in *Al- Azhar* mosque, in the universities, which were generally lead by leftists and *Al- `Amal* party (including the left- over members of the Brotherhood inside it). Also, popular committees for boycotting Israel were reactivated, as well as syndicates and workers' unions which started participating actively.

In the same context, the Egyptian Popular Committee in Solidarity with the Palestinian *Intifada* was created, and had a significant role in collecting petition signatures against Israeli violations in the Occupied Territories, collecting donations for Palestinian people, and organizing demonstrations in solidarity with the Palestinian cause. This period of social mobility reached its peak with the 20th March 2003 demonstration against the war on Iraq, which gathered in Cairo only more the 40 thousand person, and which certainly came along with violent repression and detentions to activists.

The major transformation came out through the year 2004. While the presidential elections approaching, and the debate over inheriting the presidential post to President Mubarak's son, another phase of social mobility in Egypt was born from the metamorphose of the solidarity movement with Iraq and Palestine, with the formation of movement of "*Kefaya*". It s main focus was the domestic democracy in Egypt. With the expansion of the famous slogan "No to extension.. No to inheritance", some analysts like to name this phase: "the *Kefaya* and its sisters" phase. Its main characteristics were the open participation of almost all the political forces, the rise if new forces, such as: *Al- Ghad* (Tomorrow) Party and his president Ayman Nour, as well as the return of old and existing forces to the public sphere, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. However, the traditional, classic, opposition parties tried to participate in the movement; but, they quickly discovered the protest movement is crossing all the red lines which these parties imposed on themselves long ago, such as criticizing the head of the regime. This was also a disturbing factor which caused a confusion for forces like the Brotherhood during this phase.

In the same context, another movement for syndical independence was born: engineers, journalists, lawyers and judges participated. The government showed a tolerant attitude towards these protests and demonstrations, as it was trying to paint a "democratic" picture for the electoral process, until the legislative elections in May 2005, when this tolerance was replaced by an even more repressive policy against the protests, which reached their peak when the security forces harassed women (journalists and demonstrators) in Cairo streets. Nevertheless, the most

important feature of this phase was the regain of some rights, such as the right of demonstration. Consequently, this contributed to spreading out a certain "protest culture" in the Egyptian society. All of these factors lead the social mobility in Egypt to move to a third phase, the phase of the post- presidential elections, which started in 2006.

The third phase was mainly about social protests for certain demands. In fact, the main feature of this phase was the diversity of social classes participating in these protests: starting with the classic classes, such as industrial, and services' workers, professional cadres such as teachers, doctors… and reaching new categories like public workers and officials, bloggers, and irregular employment like truck drivers.

This phase started off with popular uprising demanding basic rights like bread or drinkable water; and was crystallized with the movements demanding the increase of salaries and payments, or protesting certain governmental policies and decisions which may compromise their current situation. These movements reached, at the end of the day, many attempts to build their own independent organizations, whether through the formation of associations, such as: the association for "auto-rickshaw" (or Tok-tok as it is named in Egypt), or the real estate tax collectors announcing the creation of the first independent syndicate in Egypt since 60 years.

The regional or Nationalist aspect wasn't nonetheless absent during this period, as there were many demonstrations in solidarity of Lebanon during the July 2006 war; as well as, the War on Gaza in 2009, which brought back the activities of the Popular committee for solidarity with Palestine: sending relief and humanitarian aids convoys to Gaza, as unofficial and informal Cairo became a center for logistic and information support for foreign doctors and activists coming to Gaza for solidarity actions. This period also witnessed filing a case in the administrative court in order to stop exporting Egyptian natural gas to Israel; the case's session were very convenient for those who are anti- normalization to promote their ideas and their discourse, whether in courts or to the media.

This third phase also was characterized by the absence of political forces who was supposed to support or consolidate these protest movements, whether because the inability of the Leftist forces or because of the lack of political will, as in the case of the traditional opposition parties and the Muslim Brotherhood. Consequently, these new protest movements lack political efficiency, as their members generally lack experience in the field of public or political work; these movements also lack the experience of networking, therefore, they were practically isolated one from the others, which doesn't guarantee concrete benefits for these movements. However, this absence of political forces has its benefits, as these movements are built through real live experiences, generating

political cadres who are really linked to the real citizens' life, their problems and concerns; as well as being able to get rid of the diseases of the Egyptian political parties and organizations, such as monopolizing power, struggle for leadership, and excluding others. Being away from traditional political forces has also allowed these protest movements to gain their rights from the regime, as it was expected from the regime to be far less tolerant with political opposition forces than with simple protest movements demanding basic rights.

All the phases through which the protest movements went in Egypt till now are considered to be an internal evolution, as it wasn't done by any of the classic political forces, nor by the "political protest movements" themselves ("Kefaya" or its sisters). However, we can't deny the structural evolution of these new movements, as well as the obvious organizational innovation, which contributed to the assimilative capacity of these new protest movements, raised their capacities to work despite all the violent repression they face; as also most of them offered democratic examples, open to political work.

The activities they conducted on both the local and the regional levels, in comparison to their age are considered to be considerable taking limits and possibilities into account. These activities have moved practically all categories of the Egyptian society, contributed to breaking the culture of negativity and fear, which reigned over the Egyptian society for very long years.

However, it is difficult to understand these protest movements, as some theoretical approaches for social movements studies might suggest, only by focusing on their structure or their evolution, without paying much attention to the outside factors. At the same time, our analysis cannot be based on these outside factors as the only explanatory factors, as might suggest other approaches.

As we have mentioned previously, the economic factor have been, with all its variations, a strongly influent factor in the development of these movements; which is a characteristic of most of the Third World Countries, as the long periods of economic stability in the developed countries may look at economic crises as temporary periods, which wouldn't have much influence over the social movements in these countries, because the main focus of these movements is, generally, about reforming the general structure of the economy. The other way around is the situation in our country, as the economic crises are the most frequent, and this economic stability is a very short situation. Therefore, protest movements in the region are very much influenced by economic policies, and their impact on daily life, even if this protest are not related directly to economic demands. All of this is also linked with the margins of democracy which the Egyptian regime leaves, and which makes these movements able to move, develop and evolve, and gain wider margins of actions facing the regime, whether directly

or indirectly, like what happened while moving from the second phase (the *"Kefaya"* and sisters movement) to the third one (the social protest movements).

The external factor, like what happened with the interaction with the international anti-globalization movement, or the development of the fields of work of civil society internationally, and its impact on the Egyptian civil society, all had an important impact on the protest movements.

What actually makes the Egyptian case a unique one comparing to others, are these factors related to the regional position of Egypt: it has always been, not just a developer or a motor for the protest movements on the domestic level, but often a main cause for their creation and development in Egypt.

For example, the second *Intifada* was considered to be the main reason for breaking the political stagnation regaining the Egyptian scene to the first phase of social mobility, as we have discussed previously. This factor may be absent or less influent in other experiences outside the Arab region, as the Arab region is considered to be an intense international interactions' zone, mostly having a negative impact of the lives of its citizens. For instance, the two only countries of the world that are still under occupation are in this region "Palestine and Iraq".

As mentioned earlier, these phases have created certain accumulation of experience, which is considered as a first condition towards the formation of a social movement. The second one, which is the regularity, has maybe been available through the second phase, and also during the third period, with the regular mobility of the labor movement (related mostly to the definite activism of *Al- Mahala* workers), and those related to public workers and officials (after the successful experience of the real estate tax collectors'). It is also clear that the institutionalization of these movements has developed throughout the three phase: during the first and the second phase, the formation of committees and organizations in order to move, organize, and lead protestations has developed till reaching the third phase, which has started by forming committees inside the movement, in order to negotiate with the authorities, organize the protest of the workers. This phase ended particularly with the emphasis on the necessity of creating organizations with institutional framework, coming out of the protest movements, and expressing their will; in order to keep and preserve the gained benefits. This indicates that the transformation into a real "social movement" is near, with the realization of the forth condition for the formation a social movement, which is: the formation of common demands, to take the form of "long term demands", aiming at the reform of the existing structures, and not just to realize simple, instant gains.

This link between political and social arenas is the main condition to complete the evolution of these "protest movements" into "social movements". Nevertheless, the delay in developing towards fulfilling this forth condition is actually a threat to their very existence; Since the traditional political forces have failed to provide real cohesion or serious support for these new protest movements, they find themselves in front of a crossroads: On one hand, either these movements doing their best to develop themselves according to the current situation the country, creating their own political elite, tightly linked to their causes; in order to create an alternative political elite to the existing one; and therefore transforming themselves into real "social movements", having a positive impact on the Egyptian political scene, realizing the demands and protecting the rights of the classes they represent, while contributing actively in the Egyptian public sphere. Or, on the other hand, these efforts would be in vain, as the accumulated experiences created throughout the last decade would be withered, and Egypt would definitely sink back into a state of political stagnation, similar to the point of start in the 90s.