

Anarchists in Egypt, will the real Black Bloc please stand up?

Goos Hofstee

October 24, 2013

Core members of Egypt's Black Bloc hardly ever give interviews, adding to the mystery and confusion that surrounds the group. Your Middle East's Goos Hofstee was able to get one such rare talk.

The young man at the other side of the phone sounds hesitant. "How do I know I can trust you?" he says, his voice full of suspicion.

"You don't", I reply, "but I have no interest in ratting you out to the intelligence services".

This man, we'll call him Mohamed, has good reason to be anxious. The small group of friends he belongs to form the core of the original Black Bloc, the mysterious group that first emerged on the streets of Cairo this January, when protesters commemorated the two-year anniversary of the Revolution.

Protesting against the Morsi regime, the Bloc openly declared they would not eschew violence to realise their goals. Indeed, the group has since been involved in several violent incidents, such as burning the Muslim Brotherhood headquarters in the Sixth October area, storming the media offices of "Brothers Online," and torching the Freedom and Justice Party newspaper headquarters.

Using slogans such as, "Our mess prevents chaos" and, "We are confusion that prevents confusion", their protests quickly prompted a violent crackdown on Black Bloc members. The prosecutor-general's office asked citizens to arrest any person suspected of being a Bloc member, even if they did as little as merely wearing all black clothing.

A resulting manhunt saw citizens hand over activists to the security forces. Young Egyptian men, including some of Mohamed's friends, were betrayed, or randomly arrested and detained on charges of "terrorist activities". Since the removal of President Morsi, the newly installed military regime continues to target opposition protesters and conduct covert investigations into suspected Black Bloc members. To remain anonymous is therefore not only essential for the continuation of the group's work, it is also crucial for its members' personal safety.

Egypt's Black Bloc grew out of their struggle for liberation from an authoritarian system, only after non-violent civil efforts had failed. While the group's tactics originated out of a plan to protect women revolutionaries by forming a protective human shield around them at protests, the violence of the police and armed forces against peaceful protesters meant that the Bloc soon began to fight against the Morsi regime.

The first statement of the Black Bloc that outlined this mission was a video posted on Youtube. The clip, set to a loud and aggressive audio track, showed hooded and masked young men walking into Alexandria city-centre at night, waving an Egyptian flag and several black banners emblazoned with the international anarchy sign: the letter A in a circle. Their mission they declare in the video, is to “fight against the fascist regime of the Muslim Brotherhood and its armed militia”

Since Morsi was ousted, the Bloc has been fighting the military regime. The bloc’s goal has evolved to the “defence of the Revolution” against any dictatorial regime, be it military or religious. The Bloc’s members claim to have no affiliation with existing political parties and maintain that they have nothing against state institutions *per se*, “but against control by a particular system, the supremacy of a certain group.” They further contend that “the best thing is to hit the existing system and its economy by sabotaging the system’s institutions and not ones belonging to the public.

With a physical presence in more than eight cities across Egypt, and an increasingly stronger online profile, the Black Bloc is still growing in popularity. However, this growing presence poses a problem that is directly linked to the structural set-up of the group. While the Egyptian authorities are treating “the Black Bloc” as a singular, defined group, the reality is much more obscure.

As one member stated, the Black Bloc is “not a political group, but rather an idea that is not monopolized by anyone.” This secrecy and self-professed dispersed structure, in combination with the growing popularity of the Bloc’s goals and actions, has resulted in multiple Black Blocs mushrooming all over Egypt. There are several dozen Facebook pages claiming to represent the Black Bloc in Egypt, including ones for specific governorates and areas, like Black Bloc Upper Egypt, Black Bloc Cairo and Black Bloc Port Said. Moreover, a quick Google results in a multitude of video messages by activists, twitter feeds, and pages using the Black Bloc description and logos.

It seems that many of the activists are affiliated with the so-called Ultras, the hard-core fans of Cairo’s al-Ahly and Zamalek football clubs who are known for their radical politics and experience in fighting the police. However, while the Black Bloc activity is concentrated around these Ultras, it’s not limited to them, and certainly not all activists who’ve worn the balaclava or black hoodie are members of one of these football clubs.

“Religion is not important to us. Even if Egypt would become a Zionist state, it would not matter to us if it means that people are safe and have freedom and food and equality”

How closed or open the groups identifying as “Black Bloc” are in Egypt right now is thus unclear, making it difficult to determine the actual scope of the movement. Black Bloc members communicate mainly by online social media, and as their members’ identities are unknown and faces remain unseen, it is almost impossible to confirm the authenticity of those who claim to speak in its name. Moreover, due to the ever present threat of arrest, and their deep rooted suspicion of the media, the core Black Bloc members are hardly ever willing to give interviews, which only contributes to the mystery and confusion that surrounds the group.

When, after some asking around the proverbial grapevine I managed to track down Mohamed, who was one of the founders of the original Black Bloc core group, it quickly transpired that he and his fellow Bloc founders have actually distanced themselves from both the multiple Black Bloc groups and even the Black Bloc label itself. During our short interview, he explained who

the real Black Bloc was, how it got infiltrated and turned sour, and what the future holds for those who made up the original group of protesters at the core of the former Bloc.

What was the reason you set up the Black Bloc?

“Our friend Gaber Saleh, also known as Jika, got killed during clashes with the police in Mohammed Mahmoud Street in November 2012. After he got killed our group of friends, who had all been in the front lines of the clashes got together, and we decided we wanted to fight back. We were also all active on Facebook, and we decided to set up our own group and fight against the regime. We participated in the clashes against the police, attacking them with Molotov cocktails, and we filmed it and put the videos online. This way, people got to know our group, even though we remained anonymous. The public started to support us and everybody was talking about us, but no one knew who we were. I remember even my own brother and mother talking about the Black Bloc, they had no idea I was involved.”

Who is the real Black Bloc?

“We are. But we don’t use that name anymore, we now remain nameless or at times go under the banner of Arab Anarchists. The name Black Bloc has now become associated with fake groups. After we had started the Black Bloc, our mission became very popular and a lot of other Black Bloc pages started to appear online and we didn’t know who was behind them. People started to appear in the streets and on the (Tahrir) square during the clashes, and we didn’t know who they were. Then the media started talking about *the* Black Bloc, but in reality they referred to these other people, and they were never part of the real Black Bloc. We have always managed to stay anonymous. These people were forming a fake Black Bloc, and during the fight against the Muslim Brotherhood, they started working together with some army people. These army agents convinced these protesters that the army was on their side and would support them in their fight against the Muslim Brotherhood. They gave them weapons to attack the Muslim Brotherhood. For example, these fake Black Bloc members were involved in the Rabbaa clashes (the notorious July clashes near the Rabaa Al-Adaweya Mosque, between pro-Morsi supporters and government security forces). They worked together with the security forces in the clashes against the Morsi supporters. After a while, these fake Black Bloc members even started negotiating with the head of police and the Minister of Interior, and they agreed to work together against the Muslim Brotherhood. Even friends of mine were involved in this, they said that now the army and police were on their side and that they would give us justice. They were traitors to the revolution and traitors to our friends who died. They forgot about everything we fought for. So we, the core of the real Black Bloc felt betrayed, and we warned people against this deal with the police. This made the rival ‘Black Blocs’ very angry and they now consider us to be the enemy. This is why we decided to drop the name ‘Black Bloc’ because we needed to distance ourselves from these fake people.”

What was the background of these first Black Bloc founders?

“The people who created the original Black Bloc come from different walks of life, different cultures and faiths, but we share the same ideas about the revolution.”

What does that idea entail?

“We have to fight to the death. We are no better than our friends who got killed, and we are prepared to face the angel of death. We are ready to die for the revolution and for the blood of the martyrs, our friends. They were killed in the fight for our freedom. It is a good cause to die for. When we started the revolution our goal was to get freedom, justice, bread for the people, fundamental rights for everyone and equality for each. After we failed to get justice and the revolution was stolen from us and after lots of our friends died, now our primary goal is justice for the blood of the martyrs. We have to revenge our friends. That comes before the freedom, the equality and the bread.”

What would you like to see happen in Egypt, what is your vision?

“It doesn’t matter if the state is religious or not, basic human rights like food, freedom, healthcare and education is what matters. Everybody should be free to believe what they want, not be forced into a specific religion. Religion is not important to us. Even if Egypt would become a Zionist state, it would not matter to us if it means that people are safe and have freedom and food and equality. If Egypt would be a secular state, and this state would give my kids food and education, equality and healthcare and peace, we would be ok with that as well. We want a state that is a product of the revolution, where everybody can be free, not a secret, repressive state, but a state that provides a better future.”

Who are your enemies now?

“Our enemies are not just the Muslim Brotherhood. Before the Muslim Brothers, it was the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, who took over after Mubarak was toppled. Then Morsi became President, and the Muslim Brothers became our enemy because there was still no justice. After the Muslim Brotherhood was ousted, it was unbelievable but SCAF came back, and now they are our enemy again.”

What are your plans as a group now, what does the future hold for you?

“We, the real core of the former Black Bloc are now laying low because the current battle is between the army and police on the one hand and the Muslim Brotherhood on the other. They are now fighting amongst themselves who will rule the country. Only the fake Black Bloc, those who are collaborating with the army and police and intelligence agencies are still fighting. The Black Bloc you see on television and in the media now is the fake Black Bloc. We are now resting and preparing for our comeback, which will take place during the upcoming anniversary of the Mohamed Mahmoud clashes on 19 November. Then we will start to show both the Muslim Brotherhood and the army that we are still alive and that we are back. We will stay nameless and anonymous.”

With that, Mohamed says he has to go. He once again urges me not to reveal his identity. I tell him that I won't, and that I'm not even sure his name is really Mohamed. To me, and to us all, he remains nameless, faceless. There is no doubt in my mind, however, that we will see him somewhere among the anonymous, masked protesters on the streets of Cairo again.

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Retrieved on 28th October 2020 from yourmiddleeast.com

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