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Anarchism in Egypt — an interview from Tahrir Square

Joshua Stephens

July 2, 2013

I met Mohammed Hassan Aazab earlier this year over tea at a table of young anarchists in downtown Cairo. The anniversary of the revolution had just passed with massive protests and the emergence of a Western-style black bloc that appeared to have little to do with anarchists in the city. At the time, much of the ongoing grassroots organizing was against sexual violence — in particular, the mob sexual assaults that have become synonymous with any large gathering in Tahrir. The trauma of such violence carried out against protesters was apparent in our conversation. In fact, Aazab told me that he was done with protests and politics, and had resigned himself to the dysfunction of day-to-day life in Egypt.

Then came June 30. Crowds reportedly as large as 33 million took to the streets to call for the Muslim Brotherhood to step down from power, just a year after Mohammed Morsi took office. In the pre-dawn moments of July 1, as Aazab's phone battery dwindled steadily, I reconnected with him to chat a bit about his return to resistance.

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What's the feeling in Cairo right now? We're seeing reports here of the largest protests in human history.

Today, all of us worked really hard to get through the protests without violence. Everyone's afraid a civil war could break out. The protesters gave Morsi 48 hours to step down. If that deadline passes, there'll be a general strike. In the last five hours, 10 people were killed — four in Assiut and six in front of the Muslim Brotherhood headquarters. The sun is coming up now. All the old revolutionaries are preparing for clashes in the streets.

I heard that the Muslim Brotherhood headquarters were torched. Is that true?

Yes. And it's still surrounded by protesters right now.

Who called for the general strike? Are there particular unions involved?

No. The unions are totally ineffective.

So how is the strike organized?

Tamarod [the Rebel Movement] called for the general strike. Actually, it has not been organized in advance; it has been a spontaneous development. It will work by people believing in and supporting it.

Do you think people will follow through?

Port Said will start the general strike tomorrow. I have no idea to what extent people will follow through on it, beyond that. But it's clear people are absolutely determined to force Morsi out.

When we met back in February, you seemed pretty jaded, like you'd lost faith in resistance.

I still feel that way, sort of, to be honest. But when people fill the squares in these huge numbers, that feeling dissolves. I'm incredibly happy.

How are anarchists organizing within this particular moment. I got the sense that some of you were involved with Tamarod, but are you playing a particular role?

No, anarchists didn't sign onto the Tamarod declaration. Tamarod is not revolutionary at all. It was just obvious that the movement connected with millions of Egyptians, so we joined the protests. The protesters yesterday were against the idea of an Islamic dictator, but at the same time, most of them are okay with a civil or military dictator. Fuck *any* dictator. We'll never forget. We'll never forgive.

And you've got an anarchist tent in Tahrir, right now?

Yes. We've got four tents, actually.

Are you doing anything particular from those spaces?

Right now, we're working to ensure old regime supporters don't take over the sit-in.

Like physically stopping them? Are there *felool* [people nostalgic for the former regime] in the square?

A lot of them.

Are they attacking protesters, or just trying to infiltrate the movement?

They're trying to convince people to let the SCAF [Egypt's military council] take power again.

There are uprisings happening in Turkey, Brazil, Bulgaria and Chile right now. There was brief indication that it was spreading to Indonesia and Paraguay as well, and of course there is the ongoing struggle in Bahrain. Egypt has been a huge inspiration for a lot of these movements. When you overthrew Mubarak, Tunisia had happened, but not much else. Does it feel different, this time? Do you feel a part of something global?

It's different, for sure. Now, the fear comes from the possibility of civil war. Mubark was shit, but he never played the civil-war card. Morsi is so stupid that he doesn't even seem to grasp that we could very likely wind up killing each other in the streets. Things are happening now that never happened before, like people attacking bearded men on the street and insulting them.

I feel like this generation of youth around the world is powerfully revolutionary, and now we have the ability to share tools, and to broadcast ideas.

What are you hopeful for, right now?

I hope that people have learned something from what the Brotherhood did, and I hope it's the beginning of the end for political Islam, or any kind of faith in religious parties.

How can people here best support you all?

By spreading the word that Obama and U.S. government are actively supporting the formation of religious states in the Middle East. The U.S. ambassador said that Egyptians should learn the meaning of democracy! Who the fuck is she to say that?