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Egypt's Black Bloc

Oz Katerji

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When the term “Black Bloc” is used in the Western media there tends to be a lot of bullshit banded about. The right-wing press consider them good-for-nothing anarchists hell-bent on draining the welfare system and turning civil protests into bank-smashing, police-van burning riots. The center-left on the other hand often portray them as misguided & disenfranchised youth whose self-defeating tactics do no good for anyone. Black Bloc are generally considered an anarchist collective, however their motives and methods vary greatly and even the notion that they are all unilaterally anti-state or endorse radical economic systems is not entirely accurate as they lack a centralised ideology.

Generally the group dress all in black and stand at the front of protests and act as a barrier between civilian protestors and riot police and have often been known to use to violence and vandalism to achieve their objectives.

When I think of the Black Bloc I normally conjure up the image of a pungent crust-punk with A.C.A.B. (All Coppers Are Bastards) knuckle-tattoos dressed head to toe in black kicking in the windows of a Goldman Sachs building and urinating in empty Pepsi bottles to launch at marauding riot police.

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The movement was originally started in the late 70s in Germany and Holland by squatters as a response to police violence. The idea being that a loose collection of like-minded individuals could protest anonymously with strength in numbers. The movement began to not only represent squatters rights but also anti-globalisation, anti-nuclear power, animal rights and pro-choice movements among others.

David van Deusen, co-editor of a collection of writings called the Black Bloc Papers describes the Black Bloc as a group of “Radical collectives—often from within the anarcho-punk scene and typically of working class composition.”

“(They) began to urge their members and social militants generally to assemble at demonstrations donning uniform black clothes (with masks), and to march as a single protest contingent (among many others). With their identities effectively hidden in temporary uniformity, they were able to more successfully push protest actions in more militant directions while protecting themselves from being singled out for direct State oppression or later legal charges or both.”

Since then the movement has continued to evolve and grow, growing both in support and condemnation from various elements of society, so much so that Hacktivist collective Anonymous have allegedly been behind the release conflicting statements both supporting and condemning the behaviour of various Black Bloc factions in relation to the Occupy Movement.

However half way across the world the Black Bloc have found a new home far from the minor skirmishes and tear gas canisters of the G8 protests. Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor set himself on fire in January 2011 and the Middle East has been burning ever since. The world is now a radically different place since the start of the Arab Spring after Bouazizi’s death triggered revolutions across the Arab world.

Egypt – the world’s most populous Middle Eastern country – was no exception. At the end of January 2011 mass protests in Tahrir Square eventually snowballed into a full blown revo-

lution that led to the ousting of Western backed dictator Hosni Mubarak and the election of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood led by Mohammed Morsi in his place.

There remains widespread opposition to Morsi's government especially after the Muslim Brotherhood pushed through a new constitution that gave the Brotherhood sweeping powers. On top of this the country is still as corrupt as ever with Mubarak's cronies still in place in the military, police force and the judiciary.

Today's Egypt can be a pretty terrifying place where even a football riot can result in the deaths of 79 people as last year's Port Said tragedy demonstrates and in recent protests following the death sentences handed out to those involved in the tragedy a further 60 people have been shot dead. Anti-government protestors are shot dead by police on a frequent basis and dissent is cracked down on violently by the state. From that chaos however a new wing of the Black Bloc has been formed in Egypt and first started appearing a few weeks ago at the protests marking 2 years since the start of the Tahrir revolution.

Modelling themselves on the anti-establishment ideals of their Western counterparts the Egyptian Black Bloc share the same tactics and uniform however they are a mixed bag ideologically using the moniker "Chaos against Injustice".

Established as an anti-Islamist movement the Black Bloc is a widely growing phenomenon, arriving in the hundreds at mass demonstration and skirmishing with pro-government forces. The group has no qualms using violence as a response to the brutal behaviour of Egypt's internal security forces and claim responsibility for the recent firebomb attack on the Muslim Brotherhood's HQ.

Understandably this movement has terrified the Muslim Brotherhood and the gap between Egypt's revolutionary youth and the upper echelons of power could not be wider. Morsi has vowed to crack down on the group and Egypt's

Attorney General Talaat Ibrahim has ordered the police and army to arrest anyone suspected of belonging to the group and hand them over to the authorities saying in a statement that “Black Bloc is an organised group that practices terrorist activities.”

The Muslim Brotherhood have a right to fear the group that are growing quickly in numbers, their Facebook page is only a matter of weeks old but already has over 50,000 likes. The culture of violent repression against dissent in Egypt has created a group who appear to show no fear dying in the name of their cause, making their European counterparts anti-globalisation protests look more like the Berlin Love Parade in comparison.

In official videos released online the group claims it was established to “fight against the regime of the fascist tyrants, the Muslim Brotherhood and its military wing”. The group claims it is there to protect protestors and have appeared to be quite well organised having recently blocked the tramway in Alexandria alongside their Tahrir protests.

Islamist groups such as Jama’ al-Islamiya have also reacted to the group releasing statements saying, “the Black Bloc must die” and has seen the establishment of a counter movement of Islamists calling themselves the “White Bloc”.

What is important to note is that the Egyptian Black Bloc movement cannot be dismissed as a group of disgruntled teenagers as they often are in the West. The movement is highly mobile and is rapidly gaining support from sections of Egyptian society that have witnessed unimaginable bloodshed at the hands of government forces, the price paid for the right to protest is far too high in this region of the world and Black Bloc was born to counter that oppression. No matter where Egypt goes from this point onwards, the violence shows no sign of stopping and neither do Black Bloc.