

“Only the Names Have Changed”: The Continued Struggle for Democracy in Egypt

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Interview with Mamdouh Habashi

On May 5, 2011, Constanze Knoche, correspondent and co-editor of [Weltnetz TV](#), took advantage of Mamdouh Habashi's recent trip to Germany to discuss the current situation in Egypt and the direction of the Egyptian revolution. The following interview is transcribed and translated from [the original German](#)

Constanze Knoche (CK): In early April demonstrations again took place in Tahrir Square and the army used live-fire weapons against protestors. Some would assume that the army and demonstrators are on the same side, and in February the army was neutral. What were the demands of the demonstrators?

Mamdouh Habashi (MH): The army leadership was not neutral, it was never neutral. The army is not operating on a battlefield, but rather in the political sphere. They are following a clear plan. They want to save as much as possible of the old regime's structures. All the achievements of the revolution are a result of pressure from the street. On Friday, April 1st there were 300,000 people at Tahrir Square; on Friday, April 8th the number swelled to 1,500,000. For the first time, these demonstrations were in opposition to Islamists, Muslim Brotherhood and their allies the Salafists. The motto was "save the revolution, they are stealing it from us!" The demonstrators had not seen a realization of their earlier demands.



Over a million people demonstrated on April 8, 2011.

CK: You stated that the army wants to save the old structures. However, on April 13th they took Hosni Mubarak and his sons into custody, while investigators are looking into their affairs. The governmental party NDP was dissolved. Therefore, some important demands have already been fulfilled. Or are these simply concessions of the government to the protestors?

MH: Yes, these steps are only as a result of the demonstrations, especially the 1.5 million demonstrators on April 8th. There is a list of demands and the government could not avoid giving in to some, like the arrest of Mubarak. But there are many other demands. Some of them were ignored by the council of the armed forces, but after more pressure they had to give in. Examples are the dissolution of the fraudulent parliament and the cabinet of Ahmed Shafik appointed by Mubarak. This sounds as if the council only reacts to what happens. This not the case – they reacted but in keeping with their own plan.

They want to transfer power again to the old structures. The structures are the old Mubarak networks (people with close connections). Even with the dissolution of the Party, the networks still exist. These people have their connections in the security apparatus and with the office for internal affairs. These are groups which are still active in generating disinformation and performing raids. All these counter-revolutionary groups are still in power, despite the demands of the protesters.

CK: You stated that the army council wants to consolidate the old system. Can you provide concrete examples of this?

MH: Already before the April 1st demonstration a very important law was swiftly and stealthily implemented. This law criminalizes protest movements, like demonstrations and strikes. Military courts can mete out sentences of imprisonment or fines up to half a million Egyptian pounds (\$83,000 CAD) with minimal legal procedure. That is a huge amount. The law is in effect and several activists (demonstrators, workers, peasants) have already been victimized. Sentences of 5 or 10 years imprisonment were passed during the short proceedings. A few days later, I think two days, another new law on political parties was introduced. This law was a great disappointment for all those who hoped for a democratization of power.

Only the names of those in power have changed and the rules have become more stringent.

The people expected a law that would make it possible for political movements to express and to organize themselves, as it should be in a free world. Instead, what they got was a copy of the Mubarak laws, but even more restrictive. Only the names of those in power have changed and the rules have become more stringent. For instance, at the beginning of the Mubarak era you needed 20 persons to found a party. A few years later it was increased to 50 people, and just prior to 2005 it rose to 1000. Now the council of the armed forces has set the bar at 5000 people and it also requires proof of substantial financial resources before the formation of a party is allowed. In this way they have ensured that only two political parties will be able to get into the new parliament, since the elections are already planned for September 2011.

Which new movement, either left or liberal or democratic, will be able to comply with these new requirements in such a short time? Everyone understands the objective of these new rules: the protection of the old system. The old networks of Mubarak and the Muslim Brotherhood will appear under a new name with a new look.

CK: That leads to my next question. The council of the armed forces is steadfast on the date of the elections. Can you summarize what the dangers of this fast-track approach are?

MH: If this plan is realized, the main danger is the composition of the parliament. Only the Mubarak network and the Muslim Brothers will be in it. The first thing the parliament has to organize is an assembly for the new constitution. That constitution will be the starting point for the new Egypt and will be used for the coming decades. This would be a catastrophic outcome. From the outside it looks like a successful revolution, but in reality, it is just the opposite. It is just the legalization of the old structures, if this plan goes ahead.

CK: During the demonstrations there was also criticism of Marshal Tantawi, the chairman of the party now in power. What can you tell us about Mr. Tantawi?

MH: [Tantawi](#) is the head of the armed forces and long time servant of the regime. The army leadership in Egypt was a part of the old regime. There is at least as much corruption in the army as elsewhere in society. Everyone knows this and people have tried to neutralize the army. The army had to give in a bit, but it is still following its own plan.

CK: If we take a closer look at the armed forces, what influence has the USA had on the armed forces and on the democratization process in Egypt?

MH: The army of Egypt has been turned around 180 degrees. Its transformation has been a long-running process. Originally, the army fought anti-colonial battles; it was a patriotic army that took its duty seriously. Now the army stands shoulder to shoulder with the USA and accomplishes the opposite. It fights with the USA against the people. This turn around took several decades and is related to the [Camp David Accords](#) (1979).

The Accords were between the Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, but the facilitator was Jimmy Carter, the U.S. President. Carter knew that Egypt had a crucial role in the geo-strategic plans of the USA. It continues to be a strategic cornerstone. It is much more important than say Tunisia or Jordan. Egypt is an exceptional case. In the case of Egypt the USA does not want to lose control. As I often say, the USA has no interest in a democratic Egypt; on the contrary, it wants a false democracy. A false democracy is not as vulgar as a dictatorship, but is still in practice dependent on the USA.

How did they achieve this? Since 1979 the USA has had a large influence on the army and contributed \$1.3-billion annually directly to the Egyptian army – not via the Egyptian government. This flow of money is completely uncontrolled, neither by parliament nor by an audit authority. The money flows into private hands, not with the purpose to increase the military power of the army, but to buy its loyalty by diverting the army from its original task – defending the country – and into the economy. Today the army controls at least one-third of the entire economy in Egypt, from real estate and construction to agriculture and the tourism business.

CK: To return to my first question: what expectations may we still have when so much power is held by the army? What does the future hold for the revolution in Egypt?

MH: The new factor is the people. Dictators like Mubarak, made their policies without the factor of the people. It did not exist in their equations; it was of no importance to them. At this moment, however, this factor has the leading role. As long as the people are aware of their power, continuously organizing themselves and wanting (even with sacrifices) to struggle on the streets, there is still hope. And until now this is still the case. •

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