

The Uprisings in Egypt

*The Mobilisation and Ban of
Popular Committees and
Independent Trade Unions*

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By

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To Shaimaa al-Sabbagh
(1983-2015)

“We will topple this regime, created on the back of the protest law”
(Mahiennour el-Massry, 2014)

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ABSTRACT

By adopting Social Movement Theories (SMT) as a basic framework to analyze the 2011 uprisings in the Middle East, I disentangle the role of alternative networks and other forms of political conflict in reference to the Egyptian case in mobilising and forming a potential revolutionary movement. However, the intervention of the military junta, on the one hand, did not allow the proto-movement to develop into a revolution and, on the other hand, hindered the fulfilment of demands for “Social Justice” coming from the people.

This book aims to test the hypothesis of how during the Egyptian 2011 uprisings the encounter in public spaces of more organised political oppositionists with other anti-regime elements demobilised the social movements associated with the so-called “Arab Spring”. Through participatory methods, the research hypothesis of this book will be tested with reference to field work research involving Popular Committees and independent trade unions in two areas of Cairo and Mahalla al-Kubra. Driving factors for the differential impact of state repression and Political Islam on mobilisation will be identified through the analysis of the two in-depth case studies and, in a comparative perspective, with similar forms of political conflict in other Middle Eastern countries. Semi-structured interviews and participatory research will be used in order to conduct the analysis.

In this book, I argue that during the 2011 uprisings in Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood monopolised the space of dissent preventing the formation of common identities among the protesters. Especially social actors in the “Egyptian Street” (e.g. independent trade unions and Popular Committees) and other opposition groups (Liberals, Socialists, Leftists, anarchists) did not find any place within the post-uprisings government and finally have been demobilised by the politics and political discourse of a pseudo Neo-Nasserism, implemented by the regime after the 2013 military coup.

My case studies will show the effects of political mobilisation and military repression on Egyptian civil society, especially at the levels of workers' movements and Popular Committees. I will try to verify if this derived

from a low ideological and structural integration between Islamists and Leftist political groups or from other reasons (state-society relations, army control over economy, youth disengagement, etc.).

The final sections of the book broadens the perspective and addresses the implications of the findings on the workings of Popular Committees in other contexts in the Middle East and on the more general question raised in terms of democratisation; more specifically, I discuss to what extent the effectiveness of Political Islam in activating the social proto-movement might be replaced by more organised oppositional forces oriented towards social and workers' rights.

PREFACE

I began travelling in the Middle East on long expeditions with my family when I was very young. Our first trip was to Syria in 1999 and I loved this country. Then I decided to write my Italian degree thesis on the reformist movement in Iran and I worked in the political section of the Italian Embassy in Teheran to that end. I really enjoyed studying Iranian civil society and often returned to that wonderful country after my graduation. All my first job experiences were informed by my interest for the Middle East. Since 2005, I decided to learn spoken Arabic after having studied standard Arabic at college. That same year, I began working for think tanks and NGOs focused on human rights and Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. In 2009, I finally decided to leave my job and move to Egypt.

In Cairo, initially I worked as an Italian language teacher at the Italian School, at the Italian Cultural Institute (Zamalek) and at the American University. Later I began work as a journalist at the English-speaking newspaper, *al-Ahram weekly*. My editor in chief was the great Egyptian writer, Youssef Rakha (author of the “The Book of the Sultan's Seal”, 2016). When the events in Tahrir Square began to unfold I was still in Italy for the new year holidays. I landed in Cairo on the night of January 29, 2011 (four days after the first demonstrations), in the company of a friend working for the World Bank. They advised us to sleep in the airport. And we did. The next day, we thought the safest way to get to Downtown Cairo and join in was to take an ordinary taxi with some Egyptians.

Benjamin, my friend, mentioned that his house had just been attacked by unknown looters that very night. On our way back home, in Heliopolis, it was the first time I remember noticing something that was to become much clearer in the ensuing months - that is the way thugs had infiltrated Popular Committees. That was the way in which ordinary citizens organised at the micro-level to respond to the absence of police and security personnel.

On this occasion – they tried to stop the taxi on the grounds that we were foreigners, but our Egyptian fellow-travellers asked them to give us a break, and in the end they let us go. I was fascinated by this unique way of

mobilizing a local neighbourhood and later found that a similar mobilisation was up and running in my vicinity too. I was living behind the Odeon Cinema, close to TalaatHarb Street.

A few days after, on the morning of February 2, 2011, together with other Italians, we were suddenly surrounded by a group of *baltagi* (thugs) in Shubra on our way home to WestelBalad. They were carrying chains and swords. Later they delivered us to the *Mukabarat*. When it was time to let us go they questioned me particularly keenly about my Iranian visas. I remember that a Canadian intervened on my behalf asking for the release of all of us. In this case, the security personnel only briefly detained us, bringing us back to downtown Cairo the same evening, leaving us along the Corniche of the Zamalek district, where intense clashes between demonstrators and the police were still taking place.

Thus, the real change in direction for my studies, together with my love for the region as a whole, was intimately related to the so-called "Arab Spring". It was following the revolutionary dreams of so many comrades that I learned all I know about reporting in a context of widespread political mobilisation. I spent my time following the events of grassroots mobilisation, witnessing the violence of the police battling against the aspirations of the younger generations. As a scholar I have often drawn upon my previous experiences in the 2011 protests to enhance my study of this interesting region in a context of potential political transformation.

That year, from February 2011 onwards until June 2016, I became a correspondent for the Italian left-wing newspaper *il Manifesto*, covering Tahrir Square events. Between 2011 and 2015 I also reported extensively for European mainstream and specialised media. I was arranging constant interviews and meetings with activists and experts, and I began to use this overall access to form some rather original insights into political developments in Egypt, gradually arriving at a better understanding of these events that I daily witnessed. I met great people, including journalists and bloggers such as AhdafSoueif, Wael Abbas, Hossam el-Hamalawi, Alaa Abdel Fattah, Mahiennour el-Masri while these incredible events were under way.

I decided to opt for a PhD after finishing my Masters in Middle Eastern Studies, in the politics department at SOAS. Looking on from abroad for a while as these events unfolded, I soon thought that I had to spend more time in Egypt. I had been reading Foucault, Gramsci, Beinin and Tripp,

and I was convinced that among the most interesting outcomes of the 2011 events, there was the rise of a working-class-based social movement. Several opportunities to report back from events in Suez and 14 Mahalla al-Kubra only confirmed for me the central relevance of the workers' movements in Egypt, despite puny coverage of the strikes by mainstream media.

After the military coup in 2013, I was going daily to Rabaa al-Adaweya to cover Muslim Brotherhood sit-ins calling for the defence of the legitimacy of former president Mohammed Morsi. My reading of the August massacre, when the sit-in was "cleared" by security personnel, is that this will be remembered as one of the most ignominious attacks on human rights in Egyptian history. It was very hot and Ramadan. I often had iftar with the demonstrators, and I spent many hours in the Media Centre close to the Rabaa mosque.

The day of the assault on the sit-in, I was woken by a phone call from the Muslim Brotherhood politician, Jihad al-Haddad, who said that they knew the police were going to attack them. I joined MedinatNassr at ten o'clock. And I witnessed scenes of shocking devastation. I knew some of the people who were killed on this day. At that time I was living in Agouza and I remember that my flatmates were very afraid for me. They were strict respecters of the curfew, very aware of the minor thugs hanging around our house.

Meanwhile, I was deciding that it would have been really great to begin a general study of the patterns of mobilisation and demobilisation of the Egyptian oppositionists both before and after the Tahrir Square occupation, and in both urban and peripheral contexts. Ultimately I settled on a focus on the Popular Committees in the Cairo district of Sayeda Zeinab and the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) in Mahalla al-Kubra. They seemed to me from what I had witnessed to manifest the most interesting outcomes of the uprisings.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AKP	Justice and Development Party
CGTT	Confederation Générale Tunisienne du Travail
CTUWS	Center for Trade Union and Workers Services
ECESR	Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights
ECRF	Egyptian Coordination of Rights and Freedoms
EDLC	Egyptian Democratic Labour Council
EFITU	Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions
ELDF	Egyptian Life for Development Foundation
ERSAP	Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Program
ETUF	Egyptian Trade Unions Federation
EU	European Union
FJP	Freedom and Justice Party
FSA	Free Syrian Army
HDP	People's Democratic Party
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISIS	Islamic State
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KNC	Kurdish National Council
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender
LPG	Liquefied Petroleum Gas
LTDH	Tunisian Human Rights League
MB	Muslim Brotherhood
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NGC	National General Congress
NDP	National Democratic Party
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisations
NSF	National Salvation Front
NSM	New Social Movements
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PVT	Private Voluntary Organisations
PYD	Democratic Union Party
RCC	Revolutionary Command Council
RETAU	Union of Real Estate Tax Authority Workers
RNN	Rassd News Network

RS	Revolutionary Socialists
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SCAF	Supreme Council of the Armed Forces
SMT	Social Movements Theories
UGTT	Tunisian General Labour Union
US	United States
UTICA	Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts
YPG	People's Protection Units
YPJ	Women's Protection Units

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The overthrow of the authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt is the most important achievement of the 2011 Arab Uprisings. At first the media and academic accounts presented the protests as a revolution occurring in a limited space – a Square - and lasting a couple of weeks. Later, some academic works (Achcar, Alexander, and della Porta)¹ highlighted that the movement was the result of a longstanding social struggle where ordinary people were a central trigger of the grassroots protests. This book tries to draw upon this approach narrowing the gap between Social Movement Theories (SMT) and the actual flow of events during the 2011 uprisings in the Middle East. As we will discuss in this book, from the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) to the Egyptian workers' movements, from the People's Democratic Party (HDP) in Turkey to the democratic autonomy, theorised by Abdullah Öcalan and put in practice in Syrian Kurdistan, the 2011 uprisings did not only open the Pandora's box of Political Islam in the Middle East but also facilitated many other oppositional movements.

This book will be focused on the Egyptian case. Here the Muslim Brotherhood monopolised the public and political space after the 18 days of protests in Tahrir Square. Likewise, the army control over the different oppositional movements had a specific influence on the initial democratic transition. In other words, from the removal of Mubarak (2011) until the 2013 military coup, the army worked to isolate the political actors and divide and demobilise the proto-movement. This strategy prevented the further development of the uprisings and enabled the resurgence of the “Deep State” and, along with it, of more or less organised waves of terrorism² and an unprecedented state crackdown on dissent and political

¹ Achcar, G., *The People Want. A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*, Saqi Books, 2013.

² Filiu, J. P., *From Deep State to Islamic State. The Arab Counter-Revolution and its Jihadi Legacy*, Hurst Publishers, 2014.

participation. This fully blocked the demonstrations and a potential transformation of the uprisings into a revolution and a possible reshaping of atomised individuals into a collectivity³.

Firstly, I will show the important, pivotal role, of street movements in the recent events (2011-2012). If there are many studies of the Muslim Brotherhood and *Salafi* groups and the effects of the *infitah* policies at different levels on Egyptian society and the security apparatus, still a great deal needs to be done for a better understanding of other social groups, often misrepresented by the mainstream media: social and workers' movements, alternative networks and street politics, leftists and anarchist activists and their relations with more structured groups and the workings of the state.

Furthermore, this book will seek to demonstrate that, in the Egyptian case, if, at the very beginning, the encounter with the Muslim Brotherhood's activists increased the potential for a revolutionary movement, later, it disrupted the agency and demands of the social actors in the streets. Eventually, it might be argued that the threat of, and then the intervention by, the army altered the demands coming from the street. Moreover, the precipitous electoral process may have hindered the revolutionary potential and undermined the saliency of the demands of street activists.

This book will try to disentangle, in a potentially revolutionary but still authoritarian context, the dynamics of mobilisation and demobilisation in two Egyptian neighbourhoods during and after the 2011 uprisings. In the first part, in Chapters 2 and 3, I will answer to the questions: how did the social proto-movements mobilise and interact with more established political parties? How did the state react to the protests in order to demobilise the oppositional movements? What has been the place of "Bread, Freedom and Social Justice" among the demands of the demonstrators? In the second part, in Chapters 4 and 5, I will answer the questions: to what extent did the encounter in urban and peripheral neighbourhoods between non-organised groups and more defined political movements affect the workers' proto-movement and the Egyptian civil society? How did the Popular Committees and Independent Trade Unions work, and did their operations evolve when the popular unrest ended? In the third part, in Chapters 6 and 7, I will focus on the commonalities

³ Achcar, G. *The People Want*, pp. 158-159.

between the Egyptian case and the recent upheaval in other countries, especially in reference to leftist oppositional movements.

1.1 The Breakdown of Authoritarian Regimes

“The People want to overthrow the regime” was one of the most symbolic slogans of the recent protests in the Middle East⁴. In December 2010 a street vendor in Tunisia set himself on fire. In a few days, widespread demonstrations led to the end of Ben Ali's regime. On January 25 2011 a demonstration in solidarity with the Tunisian movement took place in Cairo, transforming Tahrir Square into a permanent encampment with hundreds of thousands of demonstrations asking for the end of Hosni Mubarak's regime. The reaction of the Egyptian army arrived three days later with tanks surrounding the protestors. In February and March 2011, protests of different sizes took place in Daraa, a province in the south of Syria, against the al-Assad regime; in Sanaa asking for the end of the Abdallah Saleh presidency in Yemen; some protests⁵ took place in Tripoli and Benghazi against the arbitrary practices of the Libyan Colonel Muammar Gaddafi; demonstrations took place in Manama (Bahrain); a protest began in Azadi Square in Tehran (2011) and later on in Gezi Park in Istanbul (2013). Although these protests had different backgrounds, agencies, practices and targets, they took place in a context, firstly, of economic crisis and consolidated inequalities, secondly, the decline of the key ideologies⁶: revolutionary nationalism, Marxism-Leninism and Islamism, thirdly, of decline of representative democracy: and the rise of anti-austerity, anti-capitalist, anti-politics and occupy movements.

As Hinnebusch argued,

The challenge authoritarian regimes face is that once societies reach a certain level of social mobilisation regimes that do not accommodate demands for political participation risk they will take revolutionary forms unless otherwise contained by exceptional means such as ‘totalitarianism’. MENA states were in a middle range of modernisation where democratisation pressures were significant but could still seemingly be contained and indeed had been in the republics for decades, first by a generation of populist, more inclusive, forms of authoritarianism, later by post-populist

⁴ Achcar, G. *The People Want*, p. 13.

⁵ Achcar, G. *The People Want*, p. 166.

⁶ Bayat, A. The Arab Spring and its Surprises, *Development and Change*, Volume 44 Issue 3, International Institute of Social Studies, 2013, p. 599.

‘upgrading’. Modernisation theories locate the roots of the uprisings in a growing imbalance between social mobilisation and political incorporation.⁷

After eight years of mobilisation and demobilisation, included a limited period of “Islamic Awakening”, army repressions, foreign interventions and civil wars, the 2011 social movements in North Africa and the Middle East (MENA), especially in reference to the Egyptian and the Tunisian cases, can be defined as uprisings⁸.

As Badiou states, in Egypt and Tunisia in 2011, “The inexistent has arisen. That is why we refer to uprising: people were lying down, submissive; they are getting up, picking themselves up, rising up. This rising is the rising of existence itself: the poor have not become rich; people who were unarmed are not now armed, and so forth. Basically nothing changed. What has occurred is restitution of the existence of the inexistent”⁹.

Thus, considering the noted role of street politics as a means of mass mobilisation, I will describe the Egyptian oppositional forces as non-movements. As Bayat¹⁰ states, “Non-movements refer to the collective actions of non-collective actors; they embody shared practices of large numbers of ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognizable leaderships and organisations”.

The first question we might raise: did this multifaceted proto-movement develop into a revolutionary movement? The life and death of the revolutionary process is central to this research. As Skocpol¹¹ highlighted, a revolution can be triggered by the spread of inequalities. Thus, street protests reinforce the vulnerability of the regime by showing the weakness of the state. Moreover, a social movement can grow when rising economic expectations encounter an economic slow-down or austerity¹². However,

⁷ Hinnebusch, R. 'Introduction: understanding the consequences of the Arab uprisings – starting points and divergent trajectories', *Democratization*, Vol. 22 (2), March 2015, p. 208.

⁸ Achcar, G. *The People Want*, p. 14.

⁹ Badiou, A. *The Rebirth of History. Times of Riots and Uprisings*, London, Verso, 2012, p. 56.

¹⁰ Bayat, A. *Life as Politics, How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013, p. 14.

¹¹ Skocpol, T. *Social Revolutions in the Modern World*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1994.

¹² Davies, J. C. *When Men Revolt and Why*, London, Transaction, 1971.

these factors may not be sufficient for accounting for the emergence of social movements that play a role in revolutions. As Dunn¹³ argued, it is still vital to focus on what is being attempted and what is actually achieved by movements. In other words, a revolution can best be defined in retrospect. With references to the aforementioned literature, the 2011-2012 uprisings in Egypt would be described as social non-movements. Egyptian society was deeply divided by glaring social inequalities¹⁴. Moreover, as a result of policies of economic liberalisation (*infitah*), the lower strata of the population were affected by the retreat of the state as a distributor of social and economic goods and a sudden increase in vegetable prices in the urban markets in the wake of the 2008 global economic crisis¹⁵ and in the months before the 2011 uprisings¹⁶.

1.1.1 Islamists and Dissent in Authoritarian Regimes

The monopolisation of political dissent by Islamist groups is a common feature of many Arab and Middle Eastern countries. James Scott, in *Weapons of the Weak*¹⁷, explained how Islamists monopolised the space of dissent in the village of Sadaka. As Bayat¹⁸ notes, a reference to Scott's ethnographic studies focusing on individual reactions of peasants, along with Foucault's decentred notion of power and the revival of the concept of Neo-Gramscian hegemony can serve to enhance a "micro-politics" perspective on social movements.

Placing these approaches in the context of the Egyptian proto-movement (2010-2012), I would argue that not only did the Islamists monopolise the opposition movements in the pre-revolutionary phase but, during the uprisings, they manipulated street movements and lesser organised entities in order to use and then deactivate their revolutionary potential.

Thus, this book seeks to explain how the proto-movement, its internal relations and with the activities of the state (e.g. ruling and military elites),

¹³ Dunn, J. *Modern revolutions: an introduction to the analysis of a political phenomenon*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989.

¹⁴ Achcar, G. *The People Want*, pp. 26-39.

¹⁵ Hanieh, A. *Lineages of Revolt, Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East*, Haymarket Books, Chicago, Illinois, 2013, p.2.

¹⁶ Achcar, G. *The People Want*, pp. 27 and 32.

¹⁷ Scott, J. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990.

¹⁸ Bayat, A. *Life as Politics*, p. 51.

evolved before the 2011 uprisings, during the Islamist monopolisation of power (2012-2013) and after the 2013 military coup.

In order to disentangle the role of dissent in the context of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, I will draw upon the work of Timothy Mitchell¹⁹. Mitchell's assertion that the blurred relations between state and society are used to produce and reproduce the power of the former can be shown to be relevant for understanding the politics of the Egyptian state. For these reasons, if, in the 1990s, the state was extensively disengaged from offering public services, the level of participation in informal networks increased. More specifically, this practice has been brought about by the exploitation of political dissent and then through political control of civil society²⁰.

Michel Foucault²¹ described power as the reproduction of a two-dimensional reality (structure vs. practice). This, he argued, determined the formation of a culture of the state as a means of control civil society. Both Mitchell and Foucault's approaches are very useful to explain the evolution of state-society relations in modern Egypt.

1.1.2 The “Deep State” and *Infatih* Policies

We cannot discuss the state reaction to the 2011 uprisings, if we do not describe the workings of capitalism in Egypt²². President Anwar al-Sadat started the “open door” policies or the economic liberalisation (*infatih*) in the mid-1970s, on the pattern of the Nasser's failure and, reinvigorated by Hosni Mubarak, in 1980s and 1990s, transformed the state from developmental to managerial²³. This was not the consequence of the crisis of the state but a change in the “strategy of the elite” or a “structural

¹⁹ Mitchell, T. 'Everyday Metaphors of Power', *Theory and Strategy*, Springer, Vol. 19, No. 5, (Oct. 1990), pp. 545-577.

²⁰ Mitchell, T. *Colonising Egypt*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991.

²¹ Foucault, M. *Discipline and Punish*, New York, Pantheon, 1977.

²² Luciani, G. 'Linking Economic and Political Reform in the Middle East'. In Schlumberger, O. (ed.). *Debating Arab Authoritarianism: Dynamics and Durability in Nondemocratic Regimes*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007, p. 163.

²³ Owen, R. in Hakimian, H and Moshaver, Z. (eds.) *The State and Global Change: The Political Economy of Transition in the Middle East and North Africa*, Richmond, Curzon, 2001, pp. 234-237.

adjustment”²⁴ for its own survival. Those policies demonstrated the resilience of the state and the army and entailed widespread privatisation (e.g. tourism and agriculture sectors), the separation of the ownership of the industries from the management, corresponding to the creation of joint ventures with foreign private capital²⁵. Later on, Sadat’s successor, Hosni Mubarak, paved the way for unequal growth based on the reduction of the public sector workforce, and cuts to food and transportation subsidies.

During the three decades of the Mubarak's regime, the retreat of the state brought about new forms of crony capitalism²⁶ enhancing the political power of business cliques. Waves of demonstrations (e.g. 1977, 1985, 2003, 2005, and 2008), related to prices increases, unemployment and economic stagnation, erupted in a context of political repression or co-optation.

As Warkotsch argues, if “Gamal Abdel Nasser limited political liberties and participation while increasing economic incorporation, Sadat shifted this balance towards more participation for less economic incorporation”²⁷, later Hosni Mubarak impoverished both lower and middle classes increasing repression “to a degree where it seemed arbitrary even to people not usually involved with the political sphere”.

As della Porta²⁸ highlights in this instance, “Political and economic power became in fact more intertwined under Mubarak, especially since the early 2000s. At the core of the regime, the people close to the President were in leading positions in the ruling NDP, including as ministers or personal advisers to the president [...] Privatisation increased quickly from 2004 onwards, while there was instead a de-liberalisation in the political sphere”.

²⁴ Tripp, C. *States, Elites and the Management*, In: Hakimian, H. and Moshaver, Z. (eds.): *The State and Global Change. The Political Economy of Transition in the Middle East and North Africa*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2001, p. 222.

²⁵ Ayubi, N. 'Etatisme versus Privatization: the changing economic role of the state in nine Arab countries'. In Handoussa, H. (ed.) *Economic Transition in the Middle East*, Cairo, American University Press, 1997, pp. 129-134.

²⁶ Achcar, G. *The People Want*, pp. 53-80.

²⁷ Warkotsch J. in Della Porta, D. *Mobilizing for Democracy, Comparing 1989 and 2011*, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 187-188.

²⁸ Della Porta, D. *Mobilizing for Democracy*, p. 187.

However, crony capitalism and the extremely unequal distribution of the wealth did not entail that Egypt, during the 2011 uprisings, was in a revolutionary crisis. As we shall further discuss, the resilience of the state institutions and the poorly structured social proto-movements never allowed a coherent change in the structure of power.

1.1.3 The Protests before the 2011 Uprisings

The uprisings have been described as a long-term revolutionary process²⁹ starting long before the 2011's upheaval. For example in Egypt, the funds for subsidies dropped “from 14.5% of government expenditures in 1980-81 to 5.6% in 1996-97”³⁰. The Egyptian government dropped the number of subsidised food items, reducing the portions and allowing the price of sugar and bread to rise³¹.

As Hinnebusch³² highlights, the possibility to begin a proto-movement is already intrinsic within the workings of authoritarian regimes:

Mobilisation requires not just grievances, but also a permissive opportunity structure in which societal opposition can overcome atomisation and combine for collective action. Where society is fragmented along identity lines, mass mobilisation is obstructed; in a homogeneous society shared identity facilitates it [...] Civil society was much more advanced in Egypt and Tunisia because the early onset of neo-liberalism had both necessitated greater tolerance for it and had also led to years of protest experience by activists that generated organisational skills and networks that would be crucial in the uprisings.

In a preliminary stage, the cooperation between the Muslim Brotherhood, workers' movements, street movements, leftists and other secular movements, prevented by Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar al-Sadat, had as a common target the fight against the arbitrary methods of the police that all these groups widely experienced long before the Tahrir Square occupation.

Thus della Porta notes that “In the early 1970s, an Islamist student movement had been used by Sadat to counterbalance the Left. Initially apolitical, it had concentrated on Islamic book fairs, selling of Islamic

²⁹ Achcar, G. *The People Want*, p. 17.

³⁰ Hanieh, A. *Lineages of Revolt*, p. 69.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Hinnebusch, R. *Understanding the consequences of the Arab uprisings*, p. 211.

clothes, provision of services to the community. Violence then started with clashes with left-wing students, and, in the words of an activist, 'this then evolved in the concept of changing the bad by the hand, which became essential to the movement' [...] In the 1980s and 1990s, the repression of the Islamic movement brought about new waves of radicalisation, with splinter groups emerging from the Muslim Brotherhood".³³

Between 2004 and 2006 a tactical alliance between Islamists and leftists gradually emerged. As we will see later, this "cooperative differentiation" between the opposition groups, as della Porta defines it, will be refreshed within the 2011 Tahrir proto-movement:

In the many protests carried out between 2004 and 2006, alliances were built [...] There was even increasing cooperation between left-wingers and Islamists (even the MB), as well as Nasserists. There was certainly a long history of antagonism, fuelled when, in 1977, the Islamists supported Sadat's economic measures against the leftist protestors, accused of conspiracy, and in 1993 the Left reciprocated by supporting the Unified Law for syndicates, which targeted the growing influence of the Islamists. However, some cooperation at the grassroots had developed already in the 1990s, with a major turning point in the 2000s, during the campaigns in support of the Palestinian Intifada. [...] Notwithstanding bitter divisions within and between each area, networks blossomed during waves of activism within the principle of cooperative differentiation, which meant working on the basis of consensus, avoiding divisive slogans, but also keeping independence.³⁴

Protests against the police broke out after the murder of the young activist Khaled Said in Alexandria (2010) by a police officer. The *Facebook* page in his memory, administered by a young engineer, Wael Ghonim, has been one the most important symbolic references of the anti-police movement that led to the 2011 uprisings. At that time, the overlapping political discourses of the *Kifaya* (Enough!) movement against the 2005 Mubarak sixth presidential candidacy and the struggles to stop the arbitrary methods of police officers, especially in poor neighbourhood, stimulating an anti-police, anti-Mubarak movement, were the core issues of the 2011 demonstrations.

Protests spread throughout the 2000s, in various waves including the pro-Palestine university mobilisations in 2000, protests against the US

³³ Della Porta, D. *Mobilizing for democracy*, p. 149.

³⁴ Della Porta, D. *Mobilizing for democracy*, pp. 99-100.

invasion of Iraq in 2003, the movements in *Kifaya* in 2004, the march of the judges for independence of the judiciary system in 2006, and workers' protests beginning 2008. As el-Ghobashy notes, "The reality was that Egyptians had been practicing collective action for at least a decade, acquiring organisational experience in that very old form of politics: the street action. Egypt's streets had become parliaments, negotiating tables and battlegrounds rolled into one. To compel unresponsive officials to enact or revoke specific policies, citizens blocked major roads with tree branches and burning tires; organised sit-ins in factory plans and ministers".³⁵

1.1.4 Democracy: Continuity and Change

We have seen how in Egypt the 2011 proto-movement was rooted in a longstanding process of antagonism towards the activities of the state. Yet, an initial question must be raised as to whether the 2011 uprisings were about democracy or something else? Post-democratisation analyzes have failed to explain the transition processes taking place in the Middle East after the 2011 uprisings. As Teti argues³⁶, this is primarily due to a failure to understand democracy as more than a neutral category framed in a liberal and narrowly procedural fashion. Thus, the post-democratisation current has, on the contrary, transformed a contingent model of democracy, rooted and developed in the Western tradition, to explain what the archetype of democracy is³⁷.

As the activist Gehan Ibrahim explains in an interview for this book: "Should we (the revolutionary forces after the 2013 military coup) fight again against the army, together with the Muslim Brothers? The army is implementing the counter-revolution. However, our democracy should be better than the Western systems in which citizens are forced to choose among two candidates who do not represent the grassroots' demands"³⁸.

³⁵ El-Ghobashy in Della Porta, D. *Mobilizing for Democracy*, p. 101 and also see El-Ghobashy, M. 'The Praxis of the Egyptian Revolution' *Middle East Report* 258 (Spring 2011), pp. 1-7.

³⁶ Teti, A., Beyond Lies the Wub. Challenges of (Post)-Democratization, *Middle East Critique*. 21 (1), 2012, p.7.

³⁷ Teti, A., 'Bridging the Gap: IR, Middle East Studies and the Disciplinary Politics of the Area Studies Controversy'. *European Journal of International Relations*. 13(1), 2007, p. 117.

³⁸ Interview 24. The full list of the interviewees is provided in the next section.

It might be argued that the Egyptian case has little to do with a democratic transition even when compared to the Tunisian 2011 uprisings and the Iranian Revolution in 1979. In other words, it is true that the recent demonstrations in Egypt led to a transition, but this process is not bringing democracy to the country, but it transformed Egypt from an authoritarian to a military regime. Indeed, on the one hand, in Tunisia a progressive constitution (2014) has been approved with the agreement of secular and Islamist political forces. On the other hand, in post-revolutionary Iran, a sentiment of anti-Americanism was forged, there are regular parliamentary and presidential elections, with high turn-outs, an electoral competition among chosen candidates and a strong civil society.

Thus, a second question might be raised as were there in Egypt any sort of democratic outcomes, even liberal democratic ones, after the 2011 uprisings? In Egypt, to a certain extent, the Muslim Brotherhood and *Dostur* party had as their preliminary political aims, liberal democracy. We might quote here as examples *Dostur's*³⁹ former leader, Mohamed el-Baradei, who called many times for a more democratic transitional process starting with the writing of a new constitution and the Muslim Brotherhood leaders who defended the elected president after the 2013 military coup talking about political legitimacy determined by election results and non-violent methods of dissent. On the other hand, the demands, initially and equally coming from leftist and liberal opponents, in May 2013, for regime change from the Morsi presidency did not correspond to the army and other groups' wishes, which that had little to do with democracy or accountability. In this case, the National Salvation Front (NSF) and other opposition groups validated the decisions of the military junta, through the *Tamarrod* (Rebel) campaign. Some of these forces felt threatened by the winners of the 2012 presidential elections and argued they were not true and consistent democrats⁴⁰. Thus they did not wait until the natural end of the four-year long presidential mandate, forgetting that the respect of electoral outcomes, even if these outcomes were unpalatable for the losers, is one of the central tenets of a liberal democracy and that would be very risky to resort to mass demonstrations which demanded the dissolution of parliament or the removal of the

³⁹ In Arabic *Dostur* means Constitution indeed.

⁴⁰ Waterbury, J. 'Democracy without Democrats? The potential for political liberalization in the Middle East'. In: Ghassan Salamé (ed.): *Democracy without democrats? The renewal of politics in the Muslim world*. London: Tauris, 1994, pp. 23-48.

president. In doing so, they decided to act as a proxy of the military regime exactly as the Muslim Brotherhood previously did (2012-2013).

It is true that, as Geddes stated, “the ends of authoritarian regimes are [...] problematic”⁴¹. Thus, in the case of Egypt, most of the literature on *transitology* appeared not applicable. Although experiencing periods of “critical disjunctures”⁴², as the 2011 uprisings have been, in which the traditional phases of continuity – that is, the self-reproduction of the existing order – are distracted and a window of opportunity to achieve different and diverse alternatives suddenly opened, the Egyptian state was acting in continuity with its traditional methods of operation, especially after the 2013 military coup, eventually transforming the regime from the authoritarian to military variety, as we will discuss in Chapters 2 and 3.

These moments of crisis are critical because, on the one hand, “coherent collectivities of state officials”⁴³ can launch distinctive new state strategies, insulating themselves from dominant socioeconomic interests and pursuing their own goals (e.g. within the army, the judiciary, the Interior Ministry, the Foreign Affairs Ministry, etc.). On the other hand, if today the Egyptian authorities do not follow democratic processes and thus leaving a broad space to continual internal coups and conspiracies, the political oppositions are still shaped and rooted in same arbitrary methods. Thus, all the political groups never abandoned their specific political objectives with the aim to build-up more inclusive identities forging in a more consistent discourse of democratic transition.

Drawing on the fragmentation of the protesters, the army and its closely allied paramilitary groups spread a general fear of disorder in local neighbourhoods in order to discredit and alter the street movements. As Mitchell has argued in a more general theoretical frame, the control of the state over civil society is reproduced through such clandestine top-down forms of manipulation, which allows a type of constant but ineffective dissent that does not threaten the status quo. In the Egyptian context, these

⁴¹ Geddes, B. 'What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?' *Annual Review of Political Science* (2), 1999, p. 29.

⁴² Carothers, T. 'The End of the Transition Paradigm', *Journal of Democracy*. 13, 2002, pp. 5-21.

⁴³ Skocpol, T. 'Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research'. In Evans, P. Rueschemeyer D. & Skocpol T. (eds.). *Bringing the State Back In*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 9.

strategies have been implemented by the military with the use of a variety of methods: nationalist rhetoric, the employing of criminals, the closure of streets surrounding public institutions and the provoking of sectarian clashes.

As we will see in Chapters 2 and 3, in order to deactivate the revolutionary potential of neighbourhood street movements, monopolised and manipulated by the Muslim Brotherhood, a bitter struggle arose between the state and ordinary citizens. Rapidly-called elections deactivated alternative social movements, returning them to the marginal positions they had been in before the uprising began. When the Islamists abandoned the street social movements, their continued occupation of public spaces lost its revolutionary saliency. Henceforth, the images and narratives of the street movements were dominated by the interpretations offered by state television and marginalised by the logic of electioneering in preparation for the struggle at the polls. The street social movements lost their initiative and the control of their narratives.

1.2 Methodology and Ethical Issues

This book will provide an overview of alternative networks and their mobilisation in the public space during and after the Egyptian 2011 uprisings with the specific aim of disentangling the activation and ban of Popular Committees and Independent Trade Unions. The methodology adopted has three components:

1) Literature review

This will be assessed in detail in Chapters 2 and 3 where I tackle the Egyptian 2011 uprisings, and the consequent political repression and also discuss the ideology of the new social movements where I apply the literature concerning SMT and NSMs theories (Abdelrahman, Alexander and Bassiouny, della Porta and Diani, Gelvin, Owen, Tripp) to the Egyptian case.

2) Semi-structured interviews

The 58 interviewees are prominent experts, activists and stakeholders engaged in the study of the Egyptian and Middle Eastern uprisings or directly active in the protests. The information collected through the interviews and combination of the literature review allows for a

comprehensive understanding of the so-called “Arab Spring” with specific reference to the consequences of the encounter in the public space between more and less organised social actors during the 2011 uprisings and the 2013 military coup in Egypt. The first aim of this book is to tackle the reasons why the unrest did not succeed or lead to a revolution as happened, for instance, in Iran in 1979. This is vital for the later discussion in my case studies of the dynamics of Popular Committees and independent trade unions throughout the revolutionary process.

The semi-structured interviews are problem-centered with the aim to define the targets of protests and the levels of repression, to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies of the political activists and the repressive methods of the state institutions, and to describe the specific needs and demands of the movement, with reference to workers' movements and “Social Justice”. They will also illustrate the structural and social factors influencing strategies of repression and antagonism and thus to derive a definition of the 2011 uprisings while highlighting examples of strengthened Egyptian and Middle Eastern activism in civil society and trade unions. The empirical research will involve Egyptian activists (e.g. Revolutionary Socialists, Socialist Alliance, and Young Islamists), intellectuals and economists (e.g. professors, writers, and bloggers), stakeholders and trade unionists, workers and ordinary citizens, army and police officers⁴⁴. Table I shows the numbers of interviewees per relevant entity.

⁴⁴ The interviews took place during the years in which this research has been conducted (2013-2016) in Cairo, Alexandria, Suez, London, Kobane, Mahalla al-Kubra, Diyarbakir, Milan, Rome and Paris; in Arabic, English or Egyptian dialect. This is the full list of the interviewees: 1) Hossam al-Hamalawy, Revolutionary Socialists and workers movement activist (English); 2) Professor Sami Zubaida, Birkbeck University (London); 3) Ammar Abo Bakr, graffiti maker and activist (English); 4) Ahdaf Soueif, writer (English); 5) Jihad al-Haddad, Muslim Brother optician (English); 6) Samir Amin, economist and director of the Third World Forum of Dakar (English); 7) Sonallah Ibrahim, writer and activist of the Socialist Alliance (English); 8) Ahmed, a young soldier who entered Tahrir Square on January 20 (Egyptian dialect); 9) Khaled, conscript at the Ayn Shamps' barracks (Egyptian dialect); 10) a Port Said policemen (Egyptian dialect); 11) Wael Abbas, blogger and activist (English); 12) Professor Roger Owen, Harvard University; 13) Mohammed, a young soldier of Suez (Egyptian dialect); 14) Joel Beinin, Professor of History, Stanford University; 15) Moneim Abul Fotuh, politician and presidential candidate (Arabic); 16) Mahiennur el-Massry, Revolutionary Socialists and lawyer (English); 17) Alaa al-Aswani, writer (English); 18) Khaled Ali, political activist and presidential candidate (English); 19) Hamdin Sabbahi,

Table I: Number of Interviewees per Type of Relevant Institution:

Egyptian and Tunisian activists	10
Unionists	4
Turkish MPs	2
Experts and Economists	8
Workers, fighters and ordinary citizens involved in Popular Committees	29
Soldiers, commanders and police officers	5
Total	58

All of these activists, experts and stakeholders operate at the national and local level. They have been selected based on their specific experience in participating in public protests, for their alternative approach towards social resistance or social movements, or for their social engagement in innovative practices.

As for the methodology in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, I employ an extensive use of focus groups:

3) Participatory research

In this book participatory research is conducted, composed by three focus groups⁴⁵ with a number of slots with collective discussions and interviews with 30 target activists and ordinary citizens. In an initial stage, activists and trade union representatives were involved in Sayeda Zeinab, Mahalla al-Kubra and Kobane. They provided a general framework of the Popular Committees, independent unions' targets and YPG/YPJ units in reference to their present level of mobilisation in a context of political repression or

politician and presidential candidate (English); 20) Ramy Sabri, Socialist political activist (Arabic); 21) Alaa Abdel Fattah, Socialist activist and blogger (English); 22) Ahmed Foad Negm, poet (Egyptian dialect); 23) Ahmed Seif al-Islam, former director to the Hisham Mubarak Centre (English); 24) Gehan Ibrahim, Revolutionary Socialists activist (English); 25) Zaid al-Ali, constitutional lawyer, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (English); 26) Omeya Seddik, head of the NGO *al-Muqaddima*; 27) Ziya Pir, HDP (English); 28) Figen Yuksekgad, HDP (English).

⁴⁵ See Frisina, A. *Focus groups, A Practical Guide*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2010. The participatory research can motivate citizens and workers to describe their discrimination, experiences within the movements and repertoire of actions. This is facilitated by the involvement of social workers.

war. These professionals facilitated the contacts with the grassroots activists that were involved in a later stage. Table II shows the three case studies and the number of people involved in the process:

Table II: Number of Interviewees per Case Study

Case 1 – Popular Committees in Sayeda Zeinab, seven participants.	1 Focus group with seven youngsters and ordinary people active during the upheaval.
Case 2 – Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions in Mahalla al-Kubra, nine participants.	2 Trade unionists; one focus group with seven workers involved in the workers' proto-movement.
Case 3 – Popular Committees in other Middle Eastern contexts, 14 participants.	2 Ypg-Ypj commanders; 12 young fighters in Kurdistan.

The testimonies offered insights and perspectives for the ethnography of the 2011 uprisings in the Egyptian urban and peripheral neighbourhoods as well as the evolution of Popular Committees in the Rojava Canton. However, the insights obtained from the participants within the focus groups refer to those specific case studies and cannot be used to support generalisations about the 2011-2016 events in Egypt as they are discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

As for the first focus group, after a first meeting with an ECESR gatekeeper, Ahmed⁴⁶, in the case of the Popular Committees, a snowball method has been utilised in order to involve the other participants within the same Popular Committee in Berqet Fil Street. In order to select the participants within the Popular Committees in Sayeda Zeinab, the primary data source suggested other potential sources useful for the research. In other words, the composition of this focus group has been based on contacts from initial members active in the local Committees to additional participants via chain referral.

Initially, in the three case studies, I interviewed the gatekeepers working as NGO activists, trade unionists or soldiers. They formed part of the process for the composition and organisation of the focus groups. The

⁴⁶ A full list of the interviewees, their age and current job status is provided in Chapter 4.

focus groups were organised with a specific aim of understanding the workings of Popular Committees and independent trade unions in two chosen neighbourhoods, levels of mobilisation within the social movements, cooperation between the oppositional groups, personal changes in political participation of specific activists after the 2013 military coup, narratives of the 2011 uprisings and its aftermath, relations with state agencies, political parties and the Muslim Brotherhood, targets and strategies of these organisations, comparisons with other grassroots' mobilisations in the region. At the end of each meeting we had a debriefing session with the gatekeepers involved in order to talk about the group dynamics and the relevant results for their activities.

1.2.1 Ethical Issues

There are several potential complications in this field work. First, there is the problem of the current political repression in Egypt. Second, there is the issue of accessing citizens and their activities via the gatekeepers.

For our participatory research, specific ethical procedural requirements were taken into account. Policy analysis and an understanding of the current context of repression was not suggested or reminded to the interviewees. We guaranteed that every individual in each group participated actively, and that he/she had their voice heard. Every participant within the focus groups filled a sheet with general personal informations. All the interviewees, involved both in semi-structured interviews and focus groups, received informations about the research and gave an oral consent to be quoted in the book.

During the focus groups, we sought to avoid scepticism or dissent. We explained to participants that the research could be done anonymously, if necessary. We highlighted that all the youngsters involved in the focus groups should never feel judged, and were free to answer or refuse to answer questions.

The links with the local NGOs (namely ECESR, the local Mahalla al-Kubra's trade unions and YPG/YPJ's units) and the support I have received from them might have been problematic when dealing with some groups or individuals. Most of the activists, fighters and ordinary citizens who took part in the process received some kind of support from the association gatekeepers and social workers, employed in the NGOs, who helped us, as facilitators, in forming and organising the focus groups.

It is true that the some interviewees wanted to avoid criticism of their respective associations. However, at an initial stage, especially for the Mahalla al-Kubra and the Kobane's focus groups, the presence of these facilitators during the research process helped the selection of the interviewees, the discussion and generally the voice of the activists involved in the research was neither mediated nor ignored due to their presence. I never contrasted the opinions of the facilitators.

In a later stage, during the meetings when the personal information sheets have been distributed among the interviewees, the gatekeepers did not directly take part in the focus groups, this is the case of both the independent trade unions and YPG/YPJ's case studies. As for the Sayed Zeinab case study, the ECESR's activist who initially took part within the Popular Committees did not participate in the discussion with the other components of the focus group. In other words, the gatekeepers and their political affiliation did not influence the discussions with the selected interviewees.

Especially, the fieldwork research in Egypt was informed by data collected on the ground during a series of visits to Cairo, and by interviews carried out with activists, namely downtown Cairo's street vendors, and residents of the Sayeda Zeinab district, who were active in Popular Committees during the uprisings.

As for the risks faced by the researcher, there have been several complex situations that I had to manage. For example, this happened in May 2015. I remember one day, we were coming back home from Mahalla to Cairo by microbus. I was discussing with a colleague about the day spent with the activists. In the course of this I referred to Shaimaa el-Sabbagh by name. She was an Egyptian activist and poet killed close to Talaat Harb Square by the police on January 25, 2015. On arrival in Cairo, the driver told a policeman that we were talking politics and he duly set off after us. Luckily, we had just enough time to get the first available taxi out of there.

In July 2014, during one of the meetings for the second focus group, when I left the microbus that had brought me from Cairo to Mahalla al-Kubra, the driver looked at me with some suspicion and asked me where I was heading to. No sooner had I found a place to sleep downtown that I became aware that the local branch of the *Amn el-Dawla* was constantly monitoring me. After having been informed about my presence by the hotel owner, scared by my foreign passport, they paid visits to my room

very early in the morning and again in the afternoon, always asking questions. I always tried to be obliging and to talk in Arabic as much as I could.

Finally, the third focus group has been informed by data collected in Northern Syria (Rojava) in 2015. After conducting the fieldwork research, I was arrested at the border on my way back to Turkey after the interviews with YPG-YPJ fighters, together with other foreigners⁴⁷. In the end we were expelled by the Turkish authorities after two days of detention. It is evident that it is one of their priorities to prevent any kind of coverage and research centred on what is happening in Rojava and the Kurdish areas of Turkey.

1.3 Case Selection and Research Design

In this section, I introduce by selection of case studies. The two areas of Sayeda Zeinab and Mahalla al-Kubra were chosen to carry out the participatory research and the focus groups examining the Popular Committees and independent trade unions. An explanation is required to explain why these areas are especially relevant for studying the Egyptian 2011 uprisings.

As Alexander and Bassiouny explained “the key battles of the uprising were fought not in Tahrir but in the suburbs”⁴⁸. Cairo had been the vital centre of the Egyptian 2011 uprisings. The great Egyptian city and Tahrir Square specifically had been in the spotlight of the world’s mainstream TV cameras for weeks. However, this not to say that there were no other sites of demonstrations and protests in the town’ outskirts and other parts of the country, such as, in Alexandria, where many political and workers’ activists originated; Minya and Giza, in other areas of Cairo, were centres of the Muslim Brotherhood mobilisation especially after the 2013 military coup; while Suez and Port Said also witnessed army and workers engage in pitched battles.

⁴⁷ See also <https://bianet.org/english/freedom-of-expression/165514-three-italian-and-a-french-journalist-deported>. Last time accessed 01/03/2017.

⁴⁸ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread and Freedom, Social Justice. Workers and the Revolution*, Zed Books, London, 2014, p. 23.

In this research I will be focusing both on a central district of Cairo (Sayeda Zeinab) and a peripheral area (Mahalla al-Kubra) in the Nile Delta.

1.3.1 Sayeda Zeinab

There are many reasons why Sayeda Zeinab is especially central for a better understanding of the dynamics governing the social proto-movements within the public space during the protests and its aftermath. Sayeda Zeinab is a middle class and socially mixed area, very densely populated, with some informal settlements (e.g. Abu Riche), and it is 15 minutes' walk from Tahrir Square. Moreover in Mohammed Mahmud Street serious clashes between political activists and security forces occurred. This place is vital for the understanding of the 2011 uprisings because the Ministry of Interior is located in Mohammed Mahmud Street and was the centre of the most well organised demonstrations, especially during the 18 crucial days of the mobilisation in Tahrir Square. Here graffiti artists spent days and nights challenging the regime with their art. With the repression orchestrated by the army, the alleys surrounding the Ministry of Interior became partitioned by walls and roadblocks, especially after the November 2011 demonstrations against the military junta, forcing the people to walk for hours to avoid continuous check-points during the day and the curfew nights when the internal movement within the neighbourhood was not inhibited.

The mosque of Sayeda Zeinab is surrounded by a huge open air vegetable and meat market, all around small unpaved alleys connect to the nearby ancient quarter of Helmeia or to the former King Farouk Palace of Abdin and its garden, closer to Tahrir. There is also a second, perpetually crowded, public market held on Tuesdays, in Mohammed Farid Street where the populace in 2010 was informed about the rapidly increasing vegetable prices, which was one of the triggers for social unrest. This is a very socially mixed district where many *feloul* or old regime supporters live. According to popular rumors, it was from these small alleys (Berket Fil, for instance) many infamous *baltagi* (criminals) were activated by the regime during the protests to sow chaos in order to undermine the coherence of the movement.

In general these public areas are filled with street crowds, not only in Port Said Street, the main road leading to Abbasseya, which is full of clothes shops, big supermarket chains and the daily traffic of minibuses, taxis and

carts, but the density is particularly evident within the alleys. This urban fabric has grown spontaneously in the last decades with the opening of hundreds of cafes, small shops selling food, carpenters, laundries, butchers, fruit sellers, internet cafes, restaurants, bakeries and in addition with carts arriving from the countryside selling fava beans (*fool*) and vegetables. Before the uprisings these alleys were vibrant day and night, but this is less evident nowadays.

It is of great interest to follow the development of the demonstrations through the lenses of the quarter's social dynamics. In Chapters 4 and 6, I will examine the activation and workings of the Popular Committees in this area, their internal dynamics, their composition and their later evolution into Private Voluntary Organisations or NGOs. These Popular Committees were central to the pace of the events in 2011 beginning on January 28 when the police station of Sayeda Zeinab was burnt down by residents and local political activists. Hundreds of other police stations were burnt the same night, sparked by pent-up frustrations caused by the arbitrary practices of the local police who controlled traffic, collected taxes but also raped, abused and harassed the people of this quarter. Afterwards the police fled and for months the Popular Committees controlled the neighbourhood in the absence of the police.

In Sayeda Zeinab, the turn-out for the Constitutional Referendum (March 2011) was especially high. Many young revolutionaries and NGO activists lived in this area that is slightly cheaper than downtown Cairo. Many of them after sleeping in their family homes in Sayeda Zeinab, in the morning joined the protests in Tahrir Square or participated in political debates at the offices of NGOs active in their neighbourhood, or in party headquarters. Later they would share the day's events during the night with less politicised friends in popular cafes, playing backgammon or drinking tea.

There was a very high turn-out during the parliamentary elections (2011-2012) in Sayeda Zeinab. In the absence of candidates from the former National Democratic Party (NDP), the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), the political party of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Popular Current (*Tyar Shaabi*) of Hamdin Sabbahi, part of the Egyptian Bloc (*Kutla*), were successful at the ballot box. However with the presidential elections (in June 2012), the old regime figures returned and people here mainly voted for the former Mubarak regime prime minister, Ahmed Shafiq. Just after a few months of the elections, it was already clear that the Muslim

Brotherhood was losing its political prestige, especially among the less politicised but sympathetic residents, who on several occasions had gone to Tahrir Square to take a look at the crowd and express their solidarity with the demonstrators. At the end of 2012 after the election of Morsi, who intended to extend his political powers, it was evident that the democratic transition was too rapid for these residents and was losing their trust. To a certain extent, at this stage, in this neighbourhood the previously politically mobilised young people, seemed to become more and more de-motivated.

For location, socially mixed composition, levels of mobilisation, urban fabric and number of Popular Committees, Sayed Zeinab is one of the most interesting Cairo neighbourhoods to disentangle the evolution of the committees throughout the revolutionary process, as we will see in Chapter 4.

1.3.2 Mahalla al-Kubra

As Alexander and Bassiouny argue, “strikes created a new urban geography of revolution”⁴⁹. Thus it is vital to analyze the revolts from the periphery. Mahalla al-Kubra in the Nile Delta is an industrial town with one of the biggest textile factories in Egypt: Gazal al-Mahalla. Twenty-one thousand workers are employed in the buildings of this old factory, built by Egyptian finance provided through Bank Misr. There are many reasons why this place has been chosen in this book to study the evolution of the independent trade unions and their relations with party politics and state dynamics.

Alexandria, Shubra, Suez and Ayn Sokhna have the biggest concentrations of factories and industries in the country. These places have been the centre of major labour struggles and strikes in the last few decades, and recent uprisings. However, Mahalla is the easiest to access for research for several reasons. It is only one hour by minibus from southern Cairo. There have been many episodes of clashes with police forces and public demonstrations in the last few years. Facilitated access to local activists and unionists is provided by a long history of struggle between local workers' movements and the factory management for better work conditions, salaries, and workers' rights. One of the biggest demonstrations here was in 1985 to support the Sigad workers.

⁴⁹ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 202.

It is quite common to encounter workers daily in this town especially when they begin or finish work. Likewise, the trade unionists are involved in long-term activism and demonstrations. The 6 April Youth Movement and Revolutionary Socialists have unique links to the workers here. The latter movement was born in this town in support of workers' strikes in 2008, three years before the 2011 uprisings. Many of the trade unionists here have been in jail for years and supported the Revolution Continues Coalition after the 2011 parliamentary elections. However, the connections between the activists coming from this lower middle class town and the Cairo urban areas' protesters should not be exaggerated, as we shall see in Chapters 2 and 5.

Mahalla al-Kubra stood against the Islamists' constitution (2012). This opposition came from the Left with many criticisms made concerning the lack of workers' and social rights in the draft constitution advanced by the Muslim Brotherhood. These criticisms were expressed in the municipal committees in 2012, organised to discuss the new constitution, with the widespread participation of local farmers and workers. When the constitution, advanced by the Islamists, had been approved, many demonstrators entered Shon Square, to protest against its approval. Occupations, public assemblies, flash mobs, marches, sit-ins and other forms of protests were organised in the last four years by local workers. These workplace protests were present in the factories of Mahalla al-Kubra, paralleling the major strikes and waves of workers' demonstrations of the last few years in Egypt.

However, especially among the farmers of Mahalla al-Kubra, there are many supporters of the old regime (*feloul*). It is very interesting though to study here the electoral constituencies of the different political groups and their changes during the stages of the 2011 social movements and their aftermath. At first, many Socialists or post-Communists supported the social movements in parallel with the protests going on in the whole country. Then they joined the Muslim Brotherhood during the elections but they later switched once again to the Popular Current of Hamdin Sabbahi, the Revolutionary Socialists or the post-Nasserist Socialist Alliance or even supported the 2013 military coup.

For the historical presence of industries and factories, the high number of workers' protests, levels of labour mobilisation, and number of independent trade unions, officially created only in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings, Mahalla al-Kubra is one of the most interesting peripheral

areas to be studied in Egypt with the aim to disentangle the evolution of the unions throughout the revolutionary process, as we will see in Chapter 4.

1.3.3 Research Design and Chapter Outline

By drawing upon the literature on Social Movements Theories (SMT), New Social Movements (NSMs) and alternative networks our argument about the marginalisation of Leftists and other oppositional groups caused by the more structured organisation of the Islamists will be tested first in reference to the Egyptian case and then to Popular Committees and independent trade unions thus aiming to fill the gap in the existing explanations of the workings of the 2011 uprisings and 2013 military coup. The aforementioned literature will be used as the main source of theoretical and methodological guidance in seeking to understand the dynamics of mobilisation and marginalisation of the street social movements. Central to this research is the role public space played in forging political identities. I will show how more organised and established social movements and parties manipulated these spontaneous or less organised movements. The state and the military have re-established patterns of hierarchical control, marginalising these challengers and limiting the space for dissent. The imagery of political populism invoked by military officers as well as Political Islam, as a non-revolutionary ideology, deactivated these alternative social networks.

In Chapters 2 and 3, the literature review will be presented in reference to the 2011 uprisings and the 2013 military coup in Egypt. I will disentangle the strategies of political participation within the social movement, the nature of the “Deep State” and ensuing waves of repression initiated by it, and the political ideologies of “Social Justice” and Neo-Nasserism. In Chapter 4, a definition of Popular Committees and their evolution before, during and after the 2011 uprisings will be provided in reference to fieldwork research in Sayeda Zeinab (Cairo).

In Chapter 5, the rise and repression of independent trade unions will be addressed in reference to workers' activism within several factories in Mahalla al-Kubra. In Chapters 6 and 7, comparative perspectives in the study of Popular Committees and non-violent or more violent mobilisations in the Middle East will be assessed in reference to the war in Northern Syria, and the uprisings in Tunisia. In the Conclusion, I will analyze the outcomes of the 2011 uprisings in the Middle East, the

transnational relations of the Egyptian protesters with other forms of social protests in the region and Western countries. This will entail a discussion of the political changes within the new national elite, which has arisen since 2011 in Egypt.

Conclusion

As seen in this Introduction, the 2011 “Egyptian Street” protests can be defined as uprisings. The initial and spontaneous mass mobilisation ended up in several waves of mass riots that never evolved into a more structured social movement. As we shall discuss in the next chapter, Egypt was ready for a working-class based social movement but lacked a political organisation, a leadership and an ideology that had as its first aim to include the sub-proletariat and the countryside in the workers' proto-movement.

CHAPTER TWO

THE UPRISINGS IN EGYPT: THE UNACHIEVED COALITION

In this chapter, I will provide a literature review on Social Movement Theories (SMT) and on New Social Movement Theories (NSMT), bolstered by interviews with activists and experts, in order to understand why the 2011 uprisings in Egypt did not lead to the formation of a cross-ideological coalition or political pluralism, and therefore ended up in proto-movements that lost their initial potential. In order to discuss my argument related to the monopolisation of the space of dissent by the Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian army, I will further analyze the patterns of mobilisation and demobilisation of the mass protests and at the same time weigh the usefulness for my research question to the social scientific and historical literature.

As seen in the Introduction, I now turn to the questions: how did the social proto-movements mobilise and interact with more established political parties and how did they try to be institutionalised? In other words, I will describe actors and strategies, the levels of cooperation, integration, disagreement and incommunicability between the different groups present in the “Egyptian Street” during the 2011 uprisings filling the gap between SMT and the empirical realities of the unrest.

From an Authoritarian Regime to a Military Regime

I will further describe the nature of politics in Egypt before the upheaval and the process of transition from an authoritarian to a military regime. The 2011 uprisings had been deeply affected by the types of socio-economic structures and political institutions already present in the country. Linz and Stepan⁵⁰ suggest that the type of non-democratic regime

⁵⁰ Linz, J. and Stepan, A. *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and post-Communist Europe*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

influences the potential for democratisation. Using their typology, Egypt before the events of 2011 can be termed as an authoritarian regime with a relatively high degree of pluralism, but experiencing a series of massive mobilisations due to a highly organised underground resistance based on networks which predated the Mubarak regime and persisted since the time of Nasser.

Barbara Geddes argues that a definition of a regime as authoritarian, single party, personalistic or military should be related to the “cooperation and conflict among elites”. In this respect, the pre-2011 Mubarak era can be defined as a *single party regime* where the National Democratic Party (NDP) had “some influence over policy, controlled most access to political power and government jobs and had functioning local-level organisations”⁵¹.

As for the process of transition, while Linz states that “at any point in the process up to the final point chances remain, albeit diminishing chances, to save the regime”⁵², O’Donnell and Schmitter⁵³ argue that each transition is unique.

This is the case of Egypt, where the 2011 protests and counter-revolutionary waves did not lead to a democracy. However, post-uprisings Egypt (Tantawi-Sisi) can be defined as a military regime. After the parliamentary elections (2012) and during the Morsi presidency (2012-2013), a transition from an authoritarian to a military regime took place in order to stop any revolutionary and popular demands, even if an effort to legitimise this process as an initial transition to democracy had been done by the ruling elites.

As Geddes explains, a military regime is “governed by an officer or retired officer, with the support of the military establishment and some routine mechanism for high level officers to influence policy choice and appointment”⁵⁴. Thus, it might be argued that in both the Tantawi (2011-2012) and al-Sisi (2014 onwards) periods, there were and are elements of

⁵¹ Geddes, B. ‘What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years’, *Annual Review of Political Science* (2), 1999, pp. 44-115.

⁵² Linz, J. *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Crisis, Breakdown, and Reequilibration*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, p. 11.

⁵³ O’Donnell, G. & Schmitter, P. *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986, p. 3.

⁵⁴ Geddes, B. ‘What Do We Know about Democratization’, pp. 44-115.

personalistic regimes as well, where “the leader, who usually came to power as an officer in a military coup or as the leader of a single party government, has consolidated control over policy and recruitment in his own hands, in the process marginalizing other officers' influence and/or reducing the influence and functions of the party”⁵⁵.

In other words, the Egyptian army tolerated the authoritarian regime of Mubarak as long as it was not detrimental to its corporate interests. As Kandil explains, the generals “are not fundamentally opposed to authoritarianism, as long as they are not its victims”⁵⁶. In the circumstances of the 2011 uprisings, the military personnel briefly adopted the Muslim Brotherhood as a “civilian partner”⁵⁷ in order to deflect the military's Western allies. However, the Egyptian army also underlined the Muslim Brotherhood miscalculations during their government, and later consolidated its power in a military regime with the direct control over the state institutions and a single party, supported by the military establishment, after the 2013 military coup orchestrated by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

2.1 Strategies: the “Egyptian Street”

The following section will discuss the activation and workings of the key actors of the “Egyptian Street”, citing the relevant secondary literature related to SMT and reflected through my interviews. Secondly, I will compare the Egyptian case with more successful revolutionary processes (1979 Iranian Revolution) in order to understand why the social proto-movement did not develop into a revolutionary one but into social non-movements. Thirdly, I will discuss the role of individual Egyptian protesters and oppositional groups during the 2011 uprisings, with a specific focus on leftists and alternative networks, and their relationships with more organised groups (the Muslim Brotherhood), as key findings so as to later discuss in successive chapters the role of local committees and unions throughout the revolutionary process in the two chosen neighbourhoods.

The encampment in Tahrir Square, symbol of the anti-Iraq war protests (2003), the bread Intifada (1977) and student demonstrations (1972), began during the night of January 25, 2011. It was set up by 50,000 protestors,

⁵⁵ Della Porta, D. *Mobilizing for Democracy*, p. 148.

⁵⁶ Kandil, H. *Soldiers, Spies, and Statesmen, Egypt's Road to Revolt*, London, Verso, 2012, p. 240.

⁵⁷ Abdelrahman Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt's Long Revolution Protest Movements and Uprisings*, Routledge, New York, 2015, p.112.

growing to 1 million by February 1. As the regime blocked Internet communications, the encampment “assumed an aggregative function, becoming all the more relevant”⁵⁸.

Young people were predominant in Tahrir Square during the 2011 uprisings, albeit encountering some opposition from the elders within political movements. Furthermore, many young activists, including football Ultras and gays (not necessarily included in associations defending LGBT rights), asserted their presence creatively through innovative forms of artistic resistance. Although facing harassment, Muslim and Christian women were key protagonists in the uprisings. Migrants from many Egyptian provinces (many of them peasants recently moved to the city) exercised a widespread presence in all the demonstrations following Mubarak’s resignation on February 11, 2011. Moreover, the subalterns, those who consider modernisation as “a costly enterprise”⁵⁹, who originate from deprived areas of urban Cairo, many of them street children, formed a huge group within the “People of the Revolution”. Finally, workers mobilised in industrial disputes, joined the urban uprisings on several occasions.

This multifaceted proto-movement was steered by a repertoire of direct action but did not possess a formal leadership. Protestors used non-violent methods that included sit-ins, funerals, permanent occupations of squares and pavements, marches, self-defence groups, etc. One of the key questions to be explored is the extent to which social networks were employed to connect individuals within these varied social movements and secondly why in the end their demands could not be expressed in the organised structures of Political Islam.

2.1.1 A Definition of Social Movements and New Social Movements

Using the work of della Porta and Diani on the 2011 uprisings, their aftermath and also on previous comparable social movements in other locales I will disentangle the key features of the Egyptian proto-movement.

⁵⁸ Della Porta, *D. Mobilizing for Democracy*, p. 27.

⁵⁹ Bayat, *A. Life as politics*, p. 20.

Social movements can be considered as “networks of informal relations”⁶⁰. These networks allow the diffusion of actions and the elaboration of shared interpretations of the social context. In other words, social movements are contesting collective actors who promote or stop social change. Moreover, they influence the development of the means of interpretations of society. Finally, they are the protagonists of non-institutional political actions.

The main difference between New and “old” Social Movements is not only related to tactics and mobilisation structures. NSMs do not have as their first political objective to “capture the state”⁶¹ but to “challenge the boundaries of traditional politics and to establish decentralised alternatives”⁶².

However, as Korany and el-Mahdi highlighted, the existing SMT and NSMT might be not adequate to address the Egyptian 2011 events: “The Arab Spring revealed that most of the new scholarly approaches remain deficient in fundamental, and indeed epistemological, ways”⁶³. In other words, all the attempts to homogenise the groups present in Tahrir Square or taking part in the initialised transition might result in an excessive simplification.

However, among the diverse political oppositionists who gathered in public spaces during the 2011 uprisings, several groups could fit with the general definition of social movements. This is true for 6 April Youth Movement and the Revolutionary Socialists where debates over the correct form of organisational structures were carried out for years. Thus, many activists were not sure about the need to form political parties, use the tactics of New Social Movements or even shelter under the umbrella of NGOs. Nevertheless, the 6 April Youth Movement and the Revolutionary Socialists organised flash mobs, marches in poor neighbourhoods and public gatherings before, during and after the 2011 uprisings through a

⁶⁰ Della Porta, D. and Diani, M. *Social Movements: An Introduction*, Blackwell Publishing, 2006, p. 28.

⁶¹ Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt's Long Revolution*, p. 80.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Korany, B. and El-Mahdi, R. (ed.) *Arab Spring in Egypt. Revolution and Beyond*, Cairo and New York, The American University in Cairo Press, 2012, Introduction.

diffuse use of “cyber-activism”⁶⁴, with a clever usage of *Facebook* and *Twitter*⁶⁵.

Many other groups were initially active in the protests or they later took part in the early electoral processes: such as the Liberal party *Dostur*, led by Mohammed el-Baradei; *Tyar Shaabi*, led by a former trade unionist, Hamdin Sabbahi; the Socialist Alliance and other pro-regime leftist groups (e.g. *Tagammu*, the Social Democrats); *Tyar Masri*: the youth within the Muslim Brotherhood.

Table III shows the different Secular and youth movements active during the 2011 uprisings.

Table III Secular and Youth Movements Active during the 2011 Uprisings in Egypt

Secular Political Groups	Leaders and Ideological Connotation
Revolutionary Socialists	Hossam el-Hamalawy
6 April Youth Movements	Youth engaged in the Street protests
<i>Dostur</i>	Mohammed el-Baradei
<i>Tyar Shaabi</i>	Hamdin Sabbahi
Socialist Alliance	Pro-Regime Leftist Group
<i>Tagammu</i>	Pro-Regime Leftist Group
Social Democrats	Pro-Regime Leftist Group
<i>Tyar Masri</i>	Youth of the Muslim Brotherhood
Other Groups	Ultras, Workers, non-organised alternative networks

The role of new media was particularly important before and during the Egyptian uprising. This was “beyond the capacity of the state authorities to monitor”⁶⁶. As Kamis and Vaughn argue, it enabled “cyber-activism, which was a major trigger for street activism; encouraging civic engagement, though aiding the mobilisation and organisation of protests and other

⁶⁴ Achcar, G. *The People Want*, p. 165.

⁶⁵ Achcar, G. *The People Want*, p. 163. According to *Arab Social Media Report*, there were 4.6 million Facebook users in 2010 (30.2% of the population). This numbers rapidly increased afterwards.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

forms of political expression; and promoting a new form of citizen journalism, which provides a platform for ordinary citizens to express themselves and document their own version of reality”⁶⁷.

On the other hand, these political actors also appeared to follow more traditional paths to mobilisation: the 6 April Movement and the Revolutionary Socialists had some connections to peasants’ and workers’ movements. This is evident in the testimony of Hossam el-Hamalawy, a Revolutionary Socialist activist: “After Mubarak stepped down, middle class’ workers and employees in the private sector went back to their jobs. However, Suez’s workers, transport employees, workers in the military factories, landowners could not go back to their daily life ignoring what happened. They should have understood how their grievances overlapped with Tahrir Square’s slogans”⁶⁸. However, as we will see later, Alexander and Bassiouny highlight the limits of integration between social and political struggles: “Workers did not deploy their collective social power in order to resolve the political crisis of the ruling class in their favour”⁶⁹. Moreover, Abdelrahman suggests that local workers’ leaders “mostly did not have any political affiliation”⁷⁰, while the Muslim Brotherhood was never been able “to establish a stable base within the working class”⁷¹.

Hamalawy suggests that the Revolutionary Socialists tried to bridge the gap between the tactics of NSM mobilisations and the more traditional methods of older social movement labour and rural organisations: “We wanted the organisation of workers to build-up a state that is based on the labour market. We had to enhance their capability and their knowledge about their conditions of exploitation in order to bring them (the workers) in the front line of the protests. There were many contradictions in the working class. We worked to bring the factories to Tahrir and vice versa. Our slogan was the Square and the factory one hand”⁷².

The traditionalist leftwing orientation of these groups thus led to controversies about both internal organisational structures and external strategies of mobilisation but equally how to deal with the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamists’ electoral victories and the military’s aims. The

⁶⁷ Khamis and Vaughn in Della Porta, D. *Mobilization for Democracy*, p. 60.

⁶⁸ Interview 1.

⁶⁹ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 194.

⁷⁰ Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt’s Long Revolution*, p. 62.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Interview 13.

6 April Youth Movement split over the creation of a political party in order to participate in the 2012 parliamentary elections. Many members of the group preferred to create an organisation resembling a NSM and did not want to be involved in party politics. Moreover, some members of the group openly supported the Muslim Brotherhood during their year in power (2012-2013). At the moment of writing, the leading figures of 6 April Youth Movement are in prison for demonstrating against the protest law, approved after the 2013 military coup, and, with some other 230 non-Islamist defendants, have been given life sentences, for receiving foreign aid not allowed by the 2013 anti-NGO law.

2.1.2 Occupation of Public Space: Conventional and Unconventional Forms of Protest

In this section I pursue further an investigation of the workings of alternative networks active during the 2011 uprisings and their relations with public space, referring to my semi-structured interviews and employing and commenting on the secondary literature which covers this topic.

Bayat suggests, streets are the spaces where people protest, but also where “they extend their protest beyond their immediate circles to include also the unknown, the 'strangers' who might espouse similar, real or imagined, grievances”⁷³. Alternative movements have been increasingly studied in contexts of authoritarian regimes (Bayat, Ismail, and Singerman)⁷⁴. According to Bayat, street politics emerges when the “quiet encroachment” of the subaltern urban classes, who generally use public space only passively, began to share feelings of discontent collectively. As Bayat⁷⁵ argues “the passive networks represent a key feature in the formation of non-movements. The poor street vendors would recognise their common predicaments by noticing one another on street corners on a daily basis, even though they may never know or speak to one another [...] They can be mobilised without active or deliberately constructed networks”.

⁷³ Bayat, A. *Life as Politics*, p. 212.

⁷⁴ Bayat, A. *Street Politics: Poor People's Movements in Iran*, Columbia University Press, 2010. Ismail, S. *Political Life in Cairo's New Quarters: Encountering the Everyday State*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006, Chapter 6. Singerman, D. *Avenues of Participation: Family, Politics and Networks in Urban Quarter of Cairo*, Princeton University Press, 1995.

⁷⁵ Bayat, A. *Life as Politics*, pp. 22 and 53.

Thus Bayat⁷⁶ continues, these non-movements mobilise only in order to defend their small but vital gains. In other words, “a common threat turns the subjects' passive networks into active communication and organised resistance”. However, as Abdelrahman⁷⁷ argues in reference to the Egyptian case, these movements were “anything but quiet”. After decades of struggle, they evolved to a point where they constantly undertook “contentious actions”⁷⁸.

Put simply, according to the poet and Socialist activist, Ahmed Foad Nigm, there was a genuine revolutionary potential on the occasion of the Egyptian uprisings unrepresented by traditional political actors and present in those latent New Social Movements embodied by the people of the urban districts:

In 2011 a Revolution was taking place in Egypt. People without a knife to cut onions faced a huge system of State Security (*Amn el-Dawla*). And it collapsed. Everybody believes now in the Egyptian youth. They were 30 in Tahrir Square, they became one million. This ability to push the people to Tahrir Square was not political. They did more than the Muslim Brotherhood and the Communists. The Egyptians did a Revolution against a corrupted and powerful regime (sic)⁷⁹.

So as Bayat argues⁸⁰, “urban streets not only serve as a physical space where conflicts are shaped and expressed, where collectives are formed, solidarities are extended, and 'street politics' are displayed”. They also signify a “crucial symbolic utterance” what the author defines “political streets”. This definition referred to “the collective sentiments, shared feelings, and public opinions of ordinary people in their day-to-day utterances and practices that are expressed broadly in public spaces”. But he also notes the difference between organised, noticeable protest and direct but hidden, collective action, as when individuals and families strive to acquire basic necessities “in a prolonged and unassuming, though illegal, fashion”, instead of organising a street march to demand electricity, for example, “the disenfranchised simply tap onto municipal power grid without authorisation”⁸¹.

⁷⁶ Bayat, A. *Life as Politics*, p. 175.

⁷⁷ Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt's Long Revolution*, p. 66.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Interview 22.

⁸⁰ Bayat, A. *Life as politics*, p. 12.

⁸¹ Bayat, A. *Life as Politics*, p. 215.

With the help of the theories of Bayat relating to post-revolutionary Iran and pre-revolutionary movements in Egypt, we can explore the ways in which passive networks of local solidarity forged an initial common revolutionary identity in anticipation to and in tandem with the more public, illegal demonstrations. As Bayat suggests, streets, squares and alleys forge the identities of people who occupy public spaces. Street vendors, the urban poor, youth, migrants and women formed non-organised movements which give rise to collective actions.

This not to suggest however, that more conventional forms of participation were not undertaken. A variety of repertoires overlapped with each other. Firstly, the protesters opened blogs and websites of citizen journalism such as Rassd News Network (RNN) and they constantly monitored the protests. Secondly, the demonstrators offered services (e.g. security checks before entering Tahrir Square). Thirdly, they began campaigning for a party or a candidate, for example this happened in order to support the Muslim Brotherhood leader, Khairat al-Shater, the former unionist, Hamdin Sabbahi, or the lawyer, Khaled Ali, when they joined for the first time the demonstrations. Fourthly, many young activists tried to convince their peers to participate: this happened during the campaign against the 2011 Constitutional Referendum. The *Laa!* (No!)'s campaign was a first opportunity to create a common ground for the secular forces as a distinct movement.

On the other hand, as mentioned, more unconventional forms of participation took place. Firstly, an unprecedented number of daily public gatherings were organised (there were demonstrations against the military junta, against the parliamentary elections, against the price increases, etc.). Secondly, demonstrators used any occasion to express their dissent. This happened during the funerals of the first victims of the demonstrations, called the "Martyrs", by the activists. Many sit-ins and public building occupations were taking places both in central and peripheral areas. Thirdly, many activists participated in workers' strikes. As we shall see, this is especially true for some of the membership of the Revolutionary Socialists and 6 April Youth Movement. Finally, accusing both the Muslim Brotherhood and the army of being counter-revolutionary agents, the protesters initiated several waves of electoral boycotts (e.g. *Kazeboon*, Layers).

All these forms of protests shared a common target: the need to influence public opinion. After the 2013 military coup, public media stigmatised all

these forms of protests and later they were suppressed. And the new victors learned to employ a series of tactics, some of them adapted from the 2011 strategies of protests. In a traditional vein, the military regime channeled all public gatherings within the parameters of nationalism (military parades and the Suez Canal extension's celebrations, Neo-Nasserism, patriotism, rehabilitating the image of the police, war campaigns, etc.). This process began before the military takeover. But since the occupation of Nasser Street in Medinat Nasser (June 2012) by former NDP and army supporters (almost the same participants in the 2013 military coup) who gathered in order to defend the candidacy of the former Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq at the 2012 presidential elections, the army and its allies used almost the same repertoires of protest of 2011 and Tahrir (street demonstrations, mass protests, etc.) against the Muslim Brotherhood government and the remnants of the 2011 uprisings.

2.1.3 Overlapping Interests and Non-Collective Identities

In this section, I will focus on the limits of the proto-movement, why it did not pose a serious revolutionary challenge. Thus, I will differentiate between street networks and other organised movements (e.g. Islamist groups, workers, liberals, etc.). Finally, I will analyze the key features of the major oppositional groups and how they used street mobilisations and party politics.

The defence of specific values and frames influenced the definition of political targets⁸². The different political group shared problems, strategies and motivations. For instance, during the uprisings different participants in the proto-movement considered the same persons (the Mubarak clique) as accountable for social inequalities and injustice. This determined a temporary political alliance between young Islamists and these alternative networks. As Gerhards⁸³ argues, to be effective the movements had to generalise an issue and highlight its importance for the life of every single person⁸⁴. This process can define common identities for the participants within the movement. Eventually, this can bring new agencies into the “movement frame”. In the Egyptian case, this did not happen except as a short-term integration of street politics, that otherwise would have been marginalised, within the social protest movement.

⁸² Della Porta, D. and Diani, M. *Social Movements*, p. 76.

⁸³ Gerhards, J. in Della Porta, D. and Diani, M. *Social Movements*, p. 88.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

However, this process happened in different contexts. The anti-Iraqi war movement (2003) and Solidarity Campaign with the Palestine Intifada (2000) brought together the Muslim Brotherhood and Secular groups. The latter in 2006 formed the *Kifaya* (Enough!) movement to prevent a new mandate for former President Mubarak. Moreover, some Muslim Brotherhood members from Alexandria and the Revolutionary Socialists formed in 2005 the National Alliance for Change and Unions within the universities⁸⁵.

As Stork argues, “In 2004, the Egyptian Movement for Change (*Kifaya*) started to mobilise against Mubarak, especially on the occasion of the presidential referendum and parliamentary elections in 2005. Even if failing to reach its aims, *Kifaya*'s mobilisation in 2005 inspired organisations such as Journalists for Change, Doctors for Change, Youth for Change, and Workers for Change. Artists for Change developed from informal networks of dissent that had kept the memory of activism alive. In 2005, left-wing and MB activists supported the mobilisation of the judges for independence [...] Islamists were key to the growth of the movement in one important way: they were the primary victims of state abuses”⁸⁶.

However the same ground for creating a common identity, for instance sharing the popular demands for “Social Justice” between the Muslim Brotherhood and other regime opponents, did not materialise in 2011. This was due to obvious weaknesses of both the Muslim Brotherhood and socialist parties from the beginning of the 2011 uprisings. As Achcar argues, “of the region's organised political forces, no current seemed capable of leading a revolutionary transformation”⁸⁷. As Zubaida adds in an interview for this book, “The day before the 2011 uprisings, the old leftist parties were irrelevant. The army conceded some freedom of gathering and speech to the youngsters but did not allow the organisation of a workers' movement”⁸⁸.

The Islamists joined the protests in Tahrir Square after a few days, however the youth within the organisation were present in the demonstrations since the first day (on January 25 2011). *Tyar Masri* was the name of the

⁸⁵ Manduchi, P. *I movimenti giovanili nel mondo arabo mediterraneo*, Carocci editore, 2014, p. 36.

⁸⁶ Stork, J. in Della Porta, D. *Mobilization for Democracy*, p. 102.

⁸⁷ Achcar, G. *The People Want*, p. 151.

⁸⁸ Interview 2.

group chosen by the youngsters to define their current within the Muslim Brotherhood in summer 2011, some months after the January demonstrations. Liberals (*Dostur*), Socialists, Islamists were protagonists as well in the first 18 days of occupation on Tahrir Square and other public spaces in the poor neighbourhoods of the main Egyptian cities. However, at this stage of the protests, the Muslim Brotherhood began to monopolise and manipulate the other political antagonists, maintaining “its hegemonic position in the popular protest movement”⁸⁹.

The main aim of this proto-movement was to topple the Mubarak regime. When this had been achieved, the Muslim Brotherhood had distinct aims compared to other anti-regime groups, namely to locate and destroy the buildings of the State Security (*Amn el-Dawla* – April 9 2011) and to win the parliamentary elections (November 2011-January 2012).

During street protests, informal networks built a potentially revolutionary movement. There were numerous activists with overlapping interests who could have also self-identified as members of different political groups at the same time. For instance Wael Ghonim, one of the most active bloggers in organising the demonstrations, had been part of the opposition secular forces later joining the Muslim Brotherhood electoral campaign for the presidential elections. This was the case for many activists of the 6 April Youth Movement, who sympathised with the Muslim Brotherhood. Similarly, we can mention here Revolutionary Socialists and other Socialist activists (e.g. Hamalawy, el-Massry, Abdel Fattah) who criticised the repression against the Islamists implemented by security forces after the 2013 military coup.

It might be argued that these temporary alliances were rooted in preceding forms of dissent and participation. As della Porta notes⁹⁰, the recruitment within a social movement is easier for those who already have some personal links to protesters. Those interpersonal solidarities, built-up in previous experiences of mobilisation, facilitate new forms of involvement. This was especially true among the Muslim Brotherhood activists who spent years together in jail but even for the most active among 6 April and the *Kifaya* movements. However, this could have been even the case in all the waves of electoral boycotts (against the Constituent Assembly as well) decided by the National Salvation Front (NSF) and the fake alliances

⁸⁹ Achcar, G. *The People Want*, p. 152.

⁹⁰ Della Porta, D. *Social Movements*, p. 132

among the secular oppositional movements on the occasion of a new wave of protests known as *Tamarrod* (Rebel), triggered by the army (May-June 2013). In a preliminary stage, within the *Tamarrod* campaign many Revolutionary Socialists, Liberals and other independent activists mobilised against the Muslim Brotherhood without the specific aim to topple Morsi or support a military coup.

Thus the most likely members of these shifting coalitions were the young and unmarried, with some experience of demonstrating, a high level of “accommodating innovation”⁹¹ (in other words the constant reinvention of prevailing norms), knowledge of available public spaces and the first to be mobilised in a revolutionary context. This is the case of the Iranian youth, as we will see later, who mobilised against the Islamic Republic during the most effective waves of protests (i.e. 1997, 2003, 2009 and 2011). In a later stage, those youngsters left the country or found some space within local NGOs, reformist foundations, newspapers and the arts. This happened in Egypt as well on the occasion of the 2011 uprisings and in the aftermath of the downfall of the Mubarak regime.

But the youngsters' mobilisation (which included rappers, gays, Ultras and graffiti artists) seemed to be weakened by certain features that this largest section of Egyptian society (70% of the population is under 30) share: precarious and multiple jobs, lack of housing, lack of participation in party politics, migration and an overestimation of the relevance of social networks as substitute for effective political debate⁹². Thus, the 2011 uprisings never had the chance to develop into a comprehensive oppositional movement because of the very factors which had driven youth to be in the vanguard of the movement.

Thus Bayat notes, “The young in general remained dispersed, atomised, and divided, with their organised activism limited to a number of Youth NGO's and publications [...] The young people subject to moral and political discipline does not necessarily render them carriers of a youth movement, because young persons are unable to forge a collective challenge to the moral and political authority without first turning into youth as a social category, that is, turning into social actors”⁹³.

⁹¹ Bayat, A. *Life as Politics*, p. 134.

⁹² Achcar, G. *The People Want*, pp. 40-42.

⁹³ Bayat, A. *Life as Politics*, pp. 18 and 118.

If those weaknesses appeared as irrelevant for the first objectives of the proto-movement, they became central reasons of disengagement with the emergence and spread of political repression. This has been the case after the 2013 military coup. The effects of the direct army take-over broke and later fragmented these already fragile, non-organised networks, finally, fully transforming the proto-movement into a series of non-movements.

In other words, horizontal networks among different strands of Egyptian society, for different reasons, did not get the chance to create solid, vertical and new channels of communication forging a more effective revolutionary movement. The absence of a structured organisation, leadership, professionalisation, integration within the oppositional movements halted the political evolution of the proto-movement towards revolutionary organisations or to the formation of a radical oppositional political party. Thus, the insurgent proto-movement which comprised the 2011 uprisings cannot be understood as a single, comprehensive phenomenon, as della Porta suggests, in her more general discussion of the usual evolution of social movements. This is true because it never reached the stage of development of a social movement as happened elsewhere, as for instance, during the Iranian uprisings (1979).

As Marfleet argues,

The movement was not homogeneous, however: it embraced those who aspired to establish a new social order, those who desired reform, and those fearful of further challenges to the status quo. These very different currents were to engage in prolonged conflict over the outcome of the uprisings⁹⁴.

At a later stage, the army takeover further splintered oppositional political forces. These divisions within the opposition groups (for instance on the subjects of terrorism, women rights, Christian minorities or *sharia*) were wedges where regime forces could undermine unity and reinstate their own privileges. The main aims of the security forces in Egypt have been to prevent a possible formation of a common, revolutionary and radical identity among the oppositional groups in order to splinter the proto-movement. As we shall see later, this strategy of the “Deep State” succeeded because the Muslim Brotherhood underestimated the potential strength of street politics and secular forces (for example *Kutla*, the Egyptian Bloc obtained 10% at the parliamentary elections). As a matter

⁹⁴ Marfleet, P. *Egypt: Contested Revolution*, p. 13.

of fact, at the ballot-box, the Secular groups had limited but not irrelevant electoral appeal.

2.1.4 A Comparative Perspective with the Iranian Revolution

In order to understand why, in other contexts, a proto-movement developed revolutionary potential, it is useful to compare the 2011 uprisings in Egypt with a more successful example: the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979⁹⁵. Bayat emphasises the importance of street politics in reference to the disenfranchised in Iran and their use of public spaces such as pavements and public transport and spaces before and after the 1978-1979 uprisings against the Shah. He argues that only in later stage the *Shi'a* clergy obtained the support of the poor to enhance its political power. As Bayat⁹⁶ explains in reference to the relevance of social actors in the street during the Islamic Revolution:

Once they are perceived as natural allies, militant Islamism and the poor need only political opportunity to realise their alliance. One such opportunity developed in Iran, owing to its remarkable economic development and social change, spearheaded by the authoritarian Shah. The urban poor, the by-product of the modernisation process, benefited little from this economic growth. Indeed, they were its victims.

In 2011 Egypt energised a similar latent alliance of the urban poor and the Muslim Brotherhood. But the Brotherhood's core constituency itself was a cross-class⁹⁷ coalition of the modern middle-class: salaried strata, liberal professionals, white collar workers and small entrepreneurs⁹⁸.

However, once in power, although the slogans of the demonstrators asking for "Social Justice" were the most common in the "Egyptian Street", the Muslim Brotherhood or the Left never tried to integrate the poorest Egyptians into their politics, especially during the transition phase. Long before 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood underwent "a social mutation",

⁹⁵ Even if it is not the aim of this book to draw upon it, this comparative perspective is very interesting. As Achcar explained, "the Brothers hailed the birth of Khomeini's regime". Thus, it is not surprising if the most important of Egyptian foreign policy's change during the Morsi presidency had been an attempt of a rapprochement with the Iran.

⁹⁶ Bayat, A. *Life as Politics*, p. 175.

⁹⁷ Goldstone, J. A. 'Cross-Class Coalitions and the Making of the Arab Revolts of 2011' *Swiss Political Science Review*. 17 (4), 2011, pp. 457-62.

⁹⁸ Achcar, G. *The People Want*, p. 157.

giving increasing importance to capitalists (e.g. Khairat al-Shatir: first choice as presidential candidate, later banned by the military junta) in detriment to the interests of the marginalised middle class and the subalterns⁹⁹. For these reasons, alternative networks, so prominent in early 2011 were left out of the transition stage. The same did not happen when the *Shi'a* clergy was in charge after the revolution in Iran in their relationship with the disenfranchised.

As Bayat argues in the case of Iran,

The mobilisation of the urban grassroots by the ruling clergy in Iran began mainly after the revolution. The clergy lent its support to the poor the rhetoric of the downtrodden, first, to offset the stands in favour of the lower class taken by the left and the Mujahedin-e Khalq, and second, to win over the poor as their social basis in their struggles against the Left, liberals, and the remnants of the ancient regime. The honeymoon between the poor and the ruling clergy was over when the poor were polarised. A segment was integrated into the state structure [...]; others remained outside and their struggles for development brought them into confrontation with the regime¹⁰⁰.

Thus, if we compare this with our case, the exclusion of the workers and the subalterns is the main reason for the failure of the Egyptian uprisings

2.2 Applying SMT and NSMT to the Egyptian Case

In this section, I will apply SMT and NSMT to the Egyptian case. If many scholars have studied the relationships between Islamists and Secular groups during the Egyptian 2011 uprisings in terms of polarisation, in this chapter I will try to adopt a different approach and discuss instances of potential cross-ideological cooperation between those diverse actors, initially present in Tahrir Square. In doing so, I will assess the nature and quality of this unachieved cooperation especially in reference to the window of opportunity opened by Mubarak's ouster.

To describe the levels of competition and cooperation between the different actors of the 2011 uprisings I will apply to the Egyptian case the "Patterns of inter-organisational cooperation among movement organisation" (Table IV), advanced by della Porta¹⁰¹. Della Porta's grid can be

⁹⁹ Achcar, G. *The People Want*, p. 124.

¹⁰⁰ Bayat, A. *Life as Politics*, p. 81.

¹⁰¹ Della Porta, D. and Diani, M. *Social Movements*, p.157.

understood in the following sense. Thus on the one hand, there is “noncompetitive cooperation” when among the different protagonists of a social movement, high cooperation and low competition for a similar constituency is present. On the other hand, there is “competitive cooperation” when among the different protagonists of a social movement, there is parallel cooperation and competition for a similar constituency. Moreover, she continues, between the different actors in the social proto-movement, there is “neutrality” in a context of lack of competition and cooperation. Finally, della Porta refers to “factionalism” when, among the groups taking part in a social movement, on the one hand, there is a lack of cooperation and on the other there is a competition for a similar constituency.

Table IV: Patterns of Inter-Organisational Cooperation among Movement Organisations

	Cooperation	Lack of cooperation
Competition for similar constituency	Competitive cooperation	Factionalism
Lack of competition	Noncompetitive cooperation	Neutrality

Table V applies this pattern to the Egyptian case in order to study the levels of competition and cooperation among Islamists and other oppositional forces during the different stages of the 2011 uprisings. At the very beginning of the occupation of Tahrir Square, in a wave of high political mobilisation and solidarity between the movements, there was “noncompetitive cooperation” between the different groups. This was helped by the permanent occupation of the same public spaces. Even the subalterns, in these circumstances, made “tactical alliances” with the Muslim Brotherhood and the revolutionaries¹⁰².

After the dismissal of Hosni Mubarak, the Muslim Brotherhood and other opposition groups witnessed a “competitive cooperation” period until the Mohamed Mahmud Street’s clashes (November 2011). With the electoral victories of the Muslim Brotherhood (2012), helped by the absence of politicians belonging to the NDP at the parliamentary elections due to their temporary ban from party politics, and during a wave of demobilising political engagement and strengthened ideological sentiment of belonging,

¹⁰² Bayat, A. *Life as Politics*, p. 227.

“neutrality” was evident among the opposition movements or newly formed political parties. Even the poor, at this stage, tended to return to their strategy of “quiet encroachment”¹⁰³. The army's stigmatisation of the Muslim Brotherhood, as counter-revolutionaries, stimulated renewed protests that brought about a complete fragmentation of the coalition of forces of the 2011 uprisings in the wake of the 2013 military coup, which led to lowered political engagement.

Table V: Types of Interactions between the Egyptian Social Movements (2011-2016)

		Cooperation	
		Yes	No
Competition	No	Noncompetitive cooperation: Tahrir Square and demonstrations all over the country. In the context of high political engagement.	Neutral: January-November 2012, in a context of decreasing political engagement.
Lack of competition	Yes	Competitive cooperation: February-November 2011. In a context of decreasing political engagement.	Factionalism: After the military coup, in the context of low political engagement.

Table VI shows the types of interactions among other social actors (2011-2015). During the 2011 uprisings, a high level of cooperation and the absence of competition among demonstrators in the streets, political parties and other social movements was evident, in a context of solidarity, high political engagement, mobilisation and constant sharing of public spaces. In the aftermath of the revolts, this was replaced with “competitive cooperation” among more organised movements, when Liberals, Socialists and other groups converged in the National Salvation Front (NSF) and took part in the parliamentary elections, and other street protesters; less prone to be involved in party politics Revolutionary Socialists, and 6 April Youth Movement, workers' movements and many youth organisations converged in very diverse and temporary coalitions such as the Coalition Youth of January 25 Revolution, and Revolution Continues (*Thawra*

¹⁰³ Bayat, A. *Life as Politics*, p. 227.

Mustamarra), in the context of decreasing political participation and increasing polarisation.

Table VI: Kind of Interactions within other Oppositional Forces (2011-2015)

		Cooperation	
		Yes	No
Competition	No	Noncompetitive cooperation: Tahrir Square and other demonstrations all over the country up to the military coup in the context of high political engagement	Neutral: After the military coup, in the context of low political engagement and polarisation.
	Yes	Competitive cooperation: Elections and <i>Tamarrod</i> , in the context of decreasing political engagement and polarisation.	Factionalism: Constitutional Referendum and al-Sisi presidency, in the context of decreasing political engagement

The Liberals, led by Mohammed el-Baradei, were worried about rushed elections (or the “electoral farce”, as Amin¹⁰⁴ termed it) and consistently supported the writing of a constitution before parliamentary elections. The “competitive cooperation” among these groups was evident during the presidential elections in 2012, when the majority of them neither supported Ahmed Shafiq nor Morsi (with certain exceptions) or during the *Tamarrod* campaign (2013). The majority of these actors supported the campaign but only Liberals (*Dostur*), former Arab League's Secretary General, Amr Moussa, and many among them were able to take part in the interim government (2013-2014). Other street actors, the Revolutionary Socialists and the 6 April Youth Movement had a more critical attitude towards the military takeover and contested all the decisions taken by the interim government, stressing a general support for human rights and condemning the repression of the Muslim Brotherhood.

¹⁰⁴ Interview 6.

After the 2013 military coup, in the context of low political participation, demobilisation and deep polarisation, there was “noncompetitive cooperation” among these groups, with very limited space for dissent for the opposition forces and the many critics of the decision of the former presidential candidate Hamdin Sabbahi to participate in the 2014 elections opposing Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. After the Constitutional Referendum in 2014, a crackdown on dissent, and the clean-up of street vendors and public cafes in popular areas, led to all these groups becoming increasingly discouraged to participate in party politics, and they were leaderless and fragmented. For instance, Strong Egypt, led by Moneim Abul Fotuh, faced the first arrests of its supporters during its campaign against the referendum (2014), while *Wasat* party leaders were jailed and the party dissolved (2013). The crackdown involved journalists, reporters, social workers, human rights and NGOs activists, all of whom had been deeply involved in strengthening Egyptian civil society. The only possible cooperation among these groups at that stage was a widespread boycott of elections.

Thus, already with the March 2011 Referendum on the Constitutional Declaration and more openly with the Mohamed Mahmud's protests (November 2011), the Muslim Brotherhood left the “Egyptian Street” and considered the other opposition groups as marginal. After decades of internal debate whether to take part in party politics, the Muslim Brotherhood formed the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) as their political wing. The army too abandoned the streets after Field Marshal Tantawi did not succeed in imposing “supra-constitutional powers” for military personnel. Instead the army sought to undermine the movement by seeking an agreement with Muslim Brotherhood.

During the Morsi presidency (2012-2013), the Muslim Brotherhood refused to forge a coalition with the secular front, due to divisions in the Muslim Brotherhood itself (elders vs. younger members), as well as ideological fragmentation outside the Brotherhood between Islamists and other rival oppositional forces. As the interviewee al-Hamalawy explains, “Islamists did not take part in general strikes. Together with the military junta, they distributed flyers to stop the workers on strike. However, the young Islamists were with us in all our struggles and fights against the military personnel. The Brotherhood's constituency is expecting different policies from them. When they talked about *sharia*, the Muslim Brothers'

leaders intended neo-liberal laws while their voters understood “Social Justice”¹⁰⁵.

As della Porta argues, these temporary relations could have created new collective identities or “multiple identities”. However it was possible that a latent or growing identity was in the process of being forged during the 18 days of Tahrir Square between the youth of the Muslim Brotherhood and other alternative groups. But this latent alliance of revolutionary forces was cut short by the Muslim Brotherhood in government (2012-2013).

In other words, the exclusionary practices of the Morsi administration contributed to end the short-lived period of cooperation between the Egyptian oppositionists, contributing to a high degree of polarisation, labeling the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood as a conservative organisation, still very far from the so-called politics of Post-Islamism. What is this Post-Islamism? Bayat supplies us with a definition:¹⁰⁶

Islam may intervene in revolutionary struggles not merely as an ideology, frame, and model, but also as harbinger of vested interests [...] (Post-Islamism) transcends Islamism as an exclusivist and totalizing ideology, seeking instead inclusion, pluralism, and ambiguity. It is nationalist in scope (as opposed to being Pan-Islamist), and consciously post-revolutionary- post idea of revolution, that is. It represents primarily a political project¹⁰⁷.

Thus for Bayat¹⁰⁸ Post-Islamism is a mix of “religiosity and rights, faith and freedom (with varied degrees), Islam and democracy”. But, in the Egyptian case, Political Islam in power showed to what extent the Muslim Brotherhood politicians acted as economic conservatives, politically exclusionary towards anti-regime instances, and, in more general terms, defenders of the status quo that prospered under the Mubarak regime. Thus, at that stage, alliances with the Left and Secular groups became impossible.

As the two-time presidential candidate Hamdin Sabbahi confirmed in an interview carried out for this book, for the other forces of the opposition, the Muslim Brotherhood no longer appeared to be a force for change. “In terms of wealth distribution: a few people and cliques of billionaires still

¹⁰⁵ Interview 1.

¹⁰⁶ Bayat, A. *Life as Politics*.

¹⁰⁷ Bayat, A. *Life as Politics*, pp. 180 and 236.

¹⁰⁸ Bayat, *The Arab Spring*, pp. 592-593.

control the country and leave the majority in poverty. The same liberalisation policies of Sadat, an aggressive capitalism strengthening the richest and damaging the poorer continued with Mubarak, Morsi and it is still existing. Nothing changed with the 2011 uprisings and later. Secondly: we suffered the dictatorship of the National Democratic Party (NDP) and the Muslim Brotherhood: the same control of a minority on a majority. Thirdly: we still did not achieve national independence”¹⁰⁹.

2.2.1 The Social Movements and Party Politics

Following weeks of occupation of public spaces in the spring and summer 2011, both the Muslim Brotherhood and the socialists appeared not yet convinced of the need for a political party and appeared much weakened by the repression of the last years of the Mubarak regime. At this time, the only two groups that were ready to become effective political actors were the reformists among the Muslim Brotherhood, known as the *Wasat* party that had already asked the authorities to be able to form a legal political party during the 1990s but had been rejected. After the 2011 uprising they succeeded but this was rather short lived and the party was dissolved after the 2013 military coup. The other force, was the Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) (discussed in Chapter 5), which were legalised by the Essam Sharaf's interim government in February 2011 but then outlawed after the coup.

In any case, the Left, secular and alternative networks never considered their demands as compatible with those of the Muslim Brotherhood. Equally, moderate Islamist leaders never considered the youth and the activists of these groups as suitable allies. Even the NSF, or among them politicians such as Moneim Abul Fotuh or Hamdin Sabbahi, initially perceived as suitable partners, were not considered by the Muslim Brotherhood as interlocutors during the formation of a government following the Brotherhood's victory in the presidential elections of June 2012. As Alexander and Bassiouny confirm, the former unionist Sabbahi “prioritised the making of political alliances against Morsi with the *feloul* (members of the old regime) above mobilizing independently”¹¹⁰. This was brought about by a growing polarisation of potentially revolutionary forces pitting the Islamists, with increased prominence given to *Salafi* tendencies against the secular and leftists, NGOs and alternative networks.

¹⁰⁹ Interview 19.

¹¹⁰ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread and Freedom*, p. 23.

Meanwhile, the police and the military junta forged an alliance that became evident only on the occasion of the June 30 anti-Muslim Brotherhood protest, which led to the consequent dissolution of Popular Committees and independent trade unions, as we will discuss in Chapters 3 and 4.

In sum, the rapid re-elaboration of past slogans and discourse from anti-regime protest before 2011 generated a cross-movement alliance among the Islamists and the other secular movements during the mass protests and the formation of the Popular Committees. But this shifted again after the Muslim Brotherhood's decision to form a political party (FJP), following shortly afterwards with their parliamentary and presidential electoral victories. As Abo Bakr explains in our interview for this book, "*Hazimun*¹¹¹ left the street protests on November 2011 during the fights on Mohammed Mahmud Street after a request of the Muslim Brotherhood, leaving alone in the streets the youth of Tahrir"¹¹².

Table VII and VIII show the results of the 2012 parliamentary and presidential elections.

Table VII: 2011-2012 Parliamentary Elections' Results

Political parties	
Freedom and Justice Party	47.2% (235 seats)
Nour Party	24.3% (123 seats)
Wafd	7.6% (38 seats)
Egyptian Bloc	6.8% (34 seats)
Al-Wasat Party	2%
Revolution Continues	1.4
Independents and others	10.6%

Source: Al-Ahram

¹¹¹ A *Salafi* oriented group.

¹¹² Interview 3.

Table VIII: Presidential Elections' Results

Candidates	First Round	Second Round
Mohamed Morsi	24.78%	51.73%
Ahmed Shafiq	23.66%	48.27%
Hamdin Sabbahi	20.72%	
Moneim Aboul Fotuh	17.47%	
Amr Moussa	11.1%	
Khaled Ali	0.58%	
Others	1.5%	

Source: Al-Ahram

This happened because the Muslim Brotherhood and their political party were perceived by other protesters as counter-revolutionary. In other words, the “transfer of power” to the elected president (June 2012) “did not put the nature of the state in question”¹¹³. This is true to such an extent that, after the 2013 military coup, cross-party alliances were unable to be established. Thus, the repression of the Muslim Brotherhood (2013 onwards) did not spark major protests from the secular groups. If on January 25 there still are commemorations in Tahrir Square, for instance, those for the Rabaa' massacre (on August 14 2013) it is not a day in which the entire anti-regime movement takes part. As Soueif explains in an interview for this book, “After the military coup we do not count the days. If the revolution was marked by symbolic protests and days that every activists will never forget, this is not the same with the Brotherhood's massacres”¹¹⁴.

As a consequence, the proto-movement continuously changed the identities of their chief adversaries. If at the beginning of the 2011 uprisings, former President Mubarak was the chief foe, after the SCAF's takeover this switched to the military junta, while at the end of 2011 the Muslim Brotherhood joined this list of enemies. This hatred for the Muslim Brotherhood was clear in the words of the socialist activist Ramy Sabri:

I was in Khalifa Mahmoud Street (during the anti-presidential decree protests on November 2012¹¹⁵) near the Presidential Palace when six Muslim Brotherhood's supporters attacked me with sticks and knives.

¹¹³ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 11.

¹¹⁴ Interview 4.

¹¹⁵ Seven people died and Mohammed Morsi has been sentenced to death for these deaths.

After a while they were dozens. They pushed me at the entrance of a building after calling police officers. I am sure that they were supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood's, they were singing pro-Morsi songs, among them I recognised Alaa Hamza, leader of the Islamist movement in the Sharqeya region¹¹⁶.

More surprisingly this mistrust of the Muslim Brotherhood did not change after the 2013 military coup. This was exactly what the army needed in order to split the oppositional forces and maintain its rule. But this strategy has not spared the secular youth movements from repression, particularly those who were presented in the mainstream media as corrupt and dangerous, especially the Ultras after the Port Said massacre¹¹⁷. Thus the riots and repression in Port Said have been used as an example of the political instability which the nation risked.

2.2.2 The Muslim Brotherhood and Party Politics

In this section, I discuss the nature of the Muslim Brotherhood after the 2011 uprisings, its policies and its relationships with other political oppositional forces. One source of tension between the Left and the Muslim Brotherhood was the feeling by the Left, that the Muslim Brotherhood was too closely aligned to US foreign policy objectives. Hanieh argues that the Muslim Brotherhood represented an “attractive partner” for Western powers¹¹⁸. Achcar adds that “the Bush administration was perfectly aware that the Muslim Brothers would be the chief beneficiaries of a democratic opening in Egypt”¹¹⁹. This point was strengthened after several meetings between Morsi and Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, and the US Ambassador in Cairo, Anne Patterson in 2012 (the same happened in Libya)¹²⁰.

¹¹⁶ Interview 20.

¹¹⁷ On February 2 2012, more than 70 people died in a few hours in the Port Said Stadium after clashes between the supporters of al-Ahly and al-Masry and the security forces.

¹¹⁸ Hanieh, A. in Alexander A. and Bassiouny M., *Bread, Freedom*, p. 17.

¹¹⁹ Achcar, G. *The People Want*, p. 122.

¹²⁰ The Muslim Brotherhood always rejected these criticisms, especially citing the Morsi's mediation during the 2012 Operation Pillar of Defence between Hamas and the Israeli government. To a certain extent, the US and EU support for the Egyptian Islamists should not be exaggerated. As a matter of fact, US Secretary of State John Kerry gave his backing to the newly established military regime and British Prime Minister David Cameron announced an inquiry into the Muslim Brotherhood activities in the UK.

In turn the Muslim Brotherhood felt that the other oppositional forces were *a priori* reluctant to cooperate with an open mind during the process of drafting a constitution or more generally with the Morsi presidency (2012-2013). As al-Haddad explains in an interview for this book:

We tried to include other opposition forces within the Constituent Assembly. They were fragmented and stubborn. They tried to block the system, then they left the Assembly. Doing so, they invalidated the first Assembly. When the Constitution was almost concluded, opposition leaders, with the interference of foreign powers, definitively left the Assembly. That year they (secular movements) had been called hundreds of time to give them responsibilities within the government. They answered: 'We are just waiting to see your corpse'. I think we have done more than enough to integrate them. Morsi should have been more revolutionary, taken the government and not depended on the secular forces. Thus, we nominated high bureaucrats who did not have any revolutionary necessity to reform the state¹²¹.

However, it is also true that the Muslim Brotherhood's policies (e.g. Islamic finance, labour rights) did not help the formation of common identities between the Islamists and left-wing movements, although at that stage presidential and governmental powers were very limited by military, the hostility¹²² of the judiciary and weak control over the security apparatus¹²³. As Khaled Ali explains in an interview for this book, "Any labour market reform cannot be done by the Brotherhood. I thought they had common interests with the Egyptian workers. But I was wrong. The Brotherhood's constituency fully supports the leaders' decisions. There are politicians and activists within the Brotherhood critical towards the leaders of the movement but they left it months ago (2010-2011)"¹²⁴.

In sum, Islamists and other secular opposition groups shared a very ambiguous common identity during the occupation of Tahrir Square and other public spaces, as well as within the Popular Committees and independent trade unions, as we shall see in the next chapters. This "noncompetitive cooperation" was partially reiterated with the formation of the new Parliament and when, after the presidential elections, former Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq could have been the new President. For this

¹²¹ Interview 5.

¹²² Interview 25.

¹²³ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 10.

¹²⁴ Interview 18.

reason some leftists decided to vote for the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Mohammed Morsi, as recalled in the interviews with Alaa Abdel Fattah and Ahdaf Soueif, "The initial result of the 2011 Revolution was the election of a legitimate Parliament, this clarified how the control of the political arena pursued by the military junta was illegitimate. An elected Parliament cannot ignore the demands coming from the revolutionaries; feel the pressure for the needed reforms and answer to the demands coming from the ongoing and future workers' strikes (sic)"¹²⁵. However, Ahdaf Soueif, as many other leftwing activists decided to vote for Morsi at the presidential elections. "At the presidential elections I decided to vote for Morsi not because he was my candidate but just because I did not want to see the Mubarak regime coming back"¹²⁶.

However, secular and Islamists never did share revolutionary, multiple or common identities. They had very different narratives about the events preceding and following the 18 days of Tahrir Square. Thus, many among the political oppositional forces and alternative networks began to forge a silent coalition that in 2012 stood against both presidential candidates. Moreover, the alternative networks were mainly formed by people who did not want to take part in the electoral process (what can be termed as anti-politics). If they participated in the elections for personal reasons, they voted either for the Muslim Brotherhood or for the army's candidates but without a deep set political motivation. This undermined the long-term viability for the formation of new political coalitions after the initial events of 2011.

One could argue that in 2011 having suffered years of repression, the opposition was in no fit state to manage the sudden revolutionary upsurge. In other words, if the Muslim Brotherhood managed to gain control of the proto-movement after 2011, this was thanks to the inherent weak and leaderless nature of the temporary coalitions forged in the heat of the 18 days in Tahrir Square. This is also true of the more structured elements of the opposition who found a temporary leader in Mohamed el-Baradei¹²⁷, former chief of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). He was never considered as a reliable interlocutor by the Muslim Brotherhood. So even if the Islamists dithered and debated for years about the formation of a political party and lacked political experience (one of the most popular

¹²⁵ Interview 21.

¹²⁶ Interview 4.

¹²⁷ He then served as Vice-President during the post-coup interim government, before leaving the country in opposition to the Rabaa massacre.

adjectives to define the Muslim Brotherhood was “incompetent”¹²⁸), they were clearly the most structured, organised, and rooted (all over the country, especially in the countryside) political force after 2011.

The Muslim Brotherhood was forced to confront the demands arising from the “Egyptian Street”. And the military junta saw its opportunity to tame the street movement by helping it become the representative of the “Street”, so as to control the proto-movements who occupied urban public spaces, while censoring or coopting the Left, the liberals and the secular parties. However, although Morsi's period in office was marked by efforts by the Muslim Brotherhood to “insert its own supporters”¹²⁹ in the apparatus of the state, this attempt was circumscribed by the military junta and the judiciary¹³⁰.

Accordingly, by the time of the 2012 presidential elections, there were no other alternative political choices except the Muslim Brothers and the military. Meanwhile former Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq, emerged as the candidate of both the military junta and former NDP political elite. He emphasised in all his speeches Egyptian nationalism and the need to rebuild the dismantled political party of Mubarak. The military accelerated the electoral campaign in order to better integrate the political oppositional groups, while the approval of the *Salafi* political party (*El-Nour*) by the military junta was instrumental in the spread of fear of disorder, thus stimulating more episodes of sectarianism and division. Thus Table IX demonstrates the correlation between occupation of public space (2011-2014) and the gradual polarisation between the Muslim Brotherhood and other movements, the former NDP and pro-army supporters.

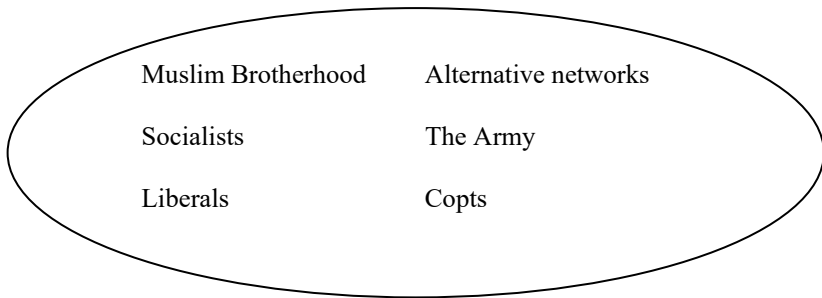
¹²⁸ Especially in reference to their foreign policy with Sudan and their attitude in the Grand Renaissance Dam's dispute with Ethiopia.

¹²⁹ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 206.

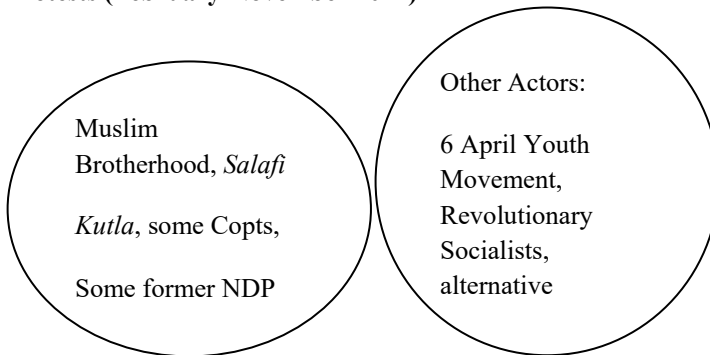
¹³⁰ Interview 25.

Table IX: Muslim Brotherhood and Secular Groups, former NDP and Pro-Army Supporters, their Gradual Polarisation and Occupation of Public Space (2011-2014)

1. Political Actors in Tahrir Square (January-February 2011)

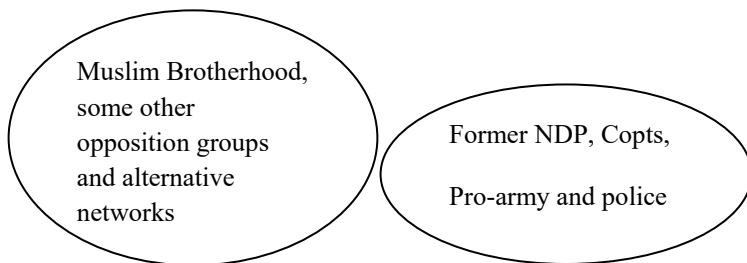


2. Political Polarisation from the Mohammed Mahmud Clashes (November 2011) to Parliament's Dissolution (June 2012) vs. Street Protests (February-November 2011)



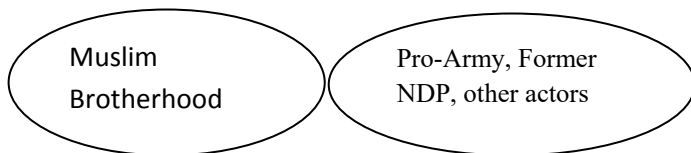
3. Political Polarisation during the Presidential Elections (June 2012)¹³¹

Tahrir Square (22-30 June 2012) vs. Medinat Nasser (22-30 June 2012)

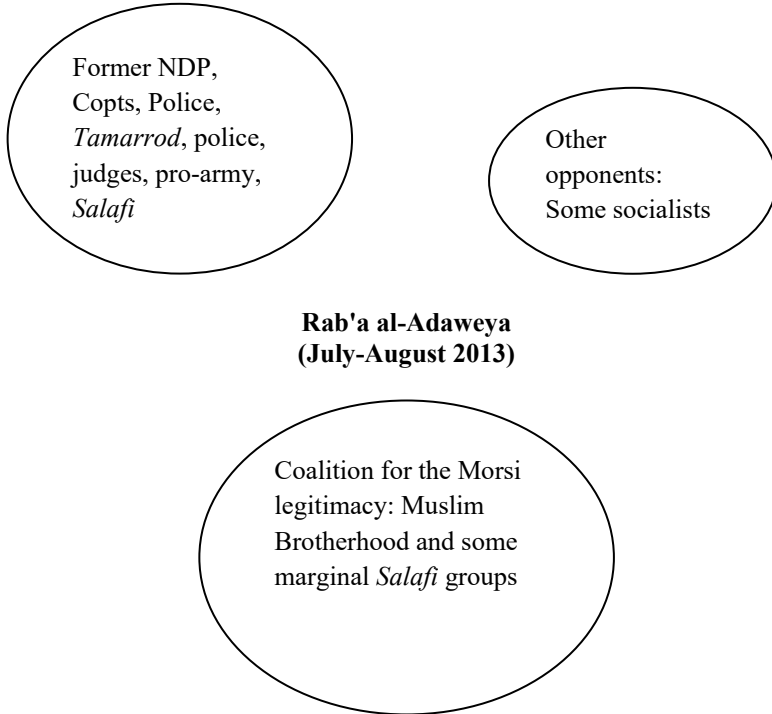


4. Political Polarisation during the Presidential Palace Clashes (November 2012)

Heliopolis Presidential Palace vs. Silent or Overt Opposition, Heliopolis



¹³¹ A silent coalition of political contestants and alternative networks saying “No” to both candidates was growing.

5. Political Polarisation after the Military Coup (2013-2014)**Tahrir Square****(June 30 and July 26 2013)****Heliopolis****(August 2013 and June 2014)**

Thus the Muslim Brotherhood was chosen as the military's temporary political proxy¹³² and the most effective anti-revolutionary movement before the 2013 military coup. As Marfleet argues, "Their [the Army and the Muslim Brotherhood] common project during the revolution was that of containment of the movement from below, which each viewed with anxiety and disdain"¹³³. However, the Muslim Brotherhood's leaders believed, naively, that the military élite no longer wanted to be directly involved in politics.

¹³² Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread and Freedom*, p. 10.

¹³³ Marfleet, P. *Egypt: Contested Revolution*, pp. 77-78.

From its foundation, the Muslim Brotherhood, operated as a substitute for the State in the lower social strata, and challenged the legitimacy of the ruling elite¹³⁴. For these reasons, Nasser and his successors maintained a well-established policy of a mixture of concessions and repression towards the Muslim Brotherhood, but also prevented its political participation in the established system. It is not the aim of this research to examine the democratic credentials of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, but this movement has often been misrepresented by some groups on the Left as “entirely reactionary” (Amin, Aswani)¹³⁵, “expressing the needs of the bourgeoisie or the petite bourgeoisie” and “working in the interests of the region's imperialist powers”¹³⁶. More radically, Fred Halliday highlights that the “Islamist movements posed an existential threat to the values and organisations of the left”¹³⁷. Thus, Achcar, in reference to the relations between the Muslim Brotherhood and the army after the uprisings, talked about “a competitive struggles within and between fractions of the same Egyptian capitalist class”¹³⁸. However, in this book I adopt a more nuanced understanding of the political location of the Muslim Brotherhood political involvement. As Alexander and Bassiouny demonstrate, the Brotherhood can be understood as a “reformist organisation”, with more “organisational resources and funding” compared to other political groups in Egypt, but ultimately “weak and hesitant” in advocating any serious programme of political reforms, once in power¹³⁹. The Left’s negative attitude towards the Islamists had often “led to tacit or active support for the state's attempts to crush Islamist movements”¹⁴⁰.

However, as argued previously after the 2011 unrest the Muslim Brotherhood monopolised and altered the demands arising from the “Street”. However, later the Brotherhood gained a certain amount of authority, it is still difficult to assess how much power Morsi really had during his presidency. The government of the Muslim Brotherhood diverted “the energy of the popular movement away from the assault on the core institutions of the old regime”¹⁴¹, even if it did not jettison all of

¹³⁴ Mitchell, R.P. *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, Oxford U.P., 1969 and Hanieh, A. *Lineages of Revolt*, p. 169.

¹³⁵ Interviews 6 and 18.

¹³⁶ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 15.

¹³⁷ Halliday, F. in Alexander A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 16.

¹³⁸ Achcar, G. in Alexander A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 17.

¹³⁹ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, pp. 20-23.

¹⁴⁰ Naguib, S. in Alexander A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 18.

¹⁴¹ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 23.

its programme, the Muslim Brotherhood took concrete steps to “ensure the continuation of the military's political and economic privileges”¹⁴². The military coup in 2013 confirmed that the Muslim Brotherhood was nevertheless perceived by the Egyptian army as not a completely reliable partner for the “Deep State”.

Conclusion

The 2011 social proto-movements in the “Egyptian Street” were monopolised by the Muslim Brotherhood. This could have been a greater leftwing input but the post-Communist parties did not achieve a great deal. They appeared weak, fragmented, disoriented and leaderless, before, during and after the uprisings. The only example of an effective recent left-wing party after a period of demonstrations (Gezi Park protests 2013) in the Middle East, at the time of writing, was the Kurdish resistance – especially the People's Democratic Party (HDP) in Turkey and the YPG/YPJ fighters in Northern Syria, as will be discussed in Chapters 6 and 7.

However, this process of marginalisation of the Left happened with many other social movements in the region. The 1979 Iranian Revolution was clearly monopolised by the *Shi'a* clerics but, in this instance, it was the Iran-Iraq war that brought about the demobilisation of all the leading actors of the uprisings, especially the left-wing parties (Communists, *Mujaheddin*, *Fedayn*, the Kurdish movements, etc.). This happened in the 2011 Tunisian uprisings as well. However, the moderate Islamist political party (*Ennahda*) was influenced by the Egyptian political repression and accepted to be a minority group in the Parliament, supporting a more comprehensive process for drafting the new Constitution, leaving space for the local trade unions and leftist activists. Similar patterns affected the political oppositions in Syria and Libya. Especially in Tripoli, the National General Congress (NGC) is now controlled by the Islamists as a consequence of a tentative military coup (2014) of the former General Khalifa Haftar, supported by President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

In this chapter I argued that during the Egyptian 2011 uprisings the social proto-movement was demobilised by its encounters in public spaces (such as Tahrir Square) with other anti-regime actors (most notably the Muslim Brotherhood). This process prevented the formation of a cross-ideological

¹⁴² Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 206.

and cross-class anti-regime coalition, as it will be argued in the Conclusion. In the next chapter, the role of the Egyptian state, society and the working class will be discussed in order to introduce the analysis of the activation and demobilisation of Popular Committees and independent trade unions.

CHAPTER THREE

THE UPRISINGS IN EGYPT: STATE, SOCIETY AND THE WORKING CLASS

With literature review and interviews, the aim of this chapter is to disentangle how the different waves of repression altered, manipulated and halted the revolutionary potential of both greater and lesser organised political oppositional forces during and after the 2011 uprisings. In other words, I will analyze the repression of the social proto-movements carried out by the “Deep State”, introducing the literature on the relationships between political and military elites, trying to understand why and how the army usually intervened when confronted with popular unrest in order to hinder mass riots and class-based social movements.

In this Chapter I will answer the following questions: How did the state react to the protests in order to demobilise the oppositional movements? What has been the place of the slogan “Bread, Freedom and Social Justice” among the demands of the demonstrators? In other words, I will disentangle the role of “Social Justice” as an ideological tool that was hijacked by the military elites with their deployment of populism. This process is relevant to later discuss how the Popular Committees in Cairo neighbourhoods were forged and demobilised in parallel with the major waves of unrest and political repression and to analyze the workings and levels of mobilisation of the independent trade unions, created after the 2011 uprisings and now under strict state control.

The army has played a vital role in the political and economic development of many post-colonial states. Especially in the Middle East, the military has been, on the one hand, an agency of modernisation, with a peculiar role in economic development, and, on the other hand, an agency of order, especially during bouts of major unrest. Therefore, in many cases in the Middle East the military and the modern national State became

coterminous¹⁴³. The Egyptian, Syrian and Iraqi armies, forged by French and British, had been modelled on the European style of organisation¹⁴⁴. As a consequence, Janowitz states “ex-colonial origin ensures that the military will not limit its role to the mark of sovereignty”¹⁴⁵.

3.1 The Military-Civilian Divide

I tackle here the military-civilian divide, explaining why in Egypt the army increased its political involvement after national independence. First of all, the relationship between military and political elites or the effects of economic liberalisation policies on officers, acting as businessmen, have always corresponded to both the overt or covert influences of the military on state institutions. Moreover, in many cases, external influences in the twentieth century forged army strategies and determined internal factionalism. Finally, the temptation of a military takeover of political institutions, in certain cases, altered the function of the military.

If, in the mid-twentieth century, the role of military officers in Egypt was prominent in overthrowing the monarchy and the beginning of the national independence movement, there are still many controversies among scholars about how one defines the precise political and economic roles of the military in the last decades. Due to the lack of fieldwork research, Owen, Vatikiotis, Hurewitz, Abdel-Malek, Nordlinger¹⁴⁶ focused their studies on army political takeovers caused by domestic threats of instability or against challenges coming from other groups (e.g. co-opted political parties, businessmen, etc.) operating within the state. In other words, as Janowitz argues, in certain cases, militaries had to increase their

¹⁴³ Janowitz, M. *Military Institutions*, p. 15

¹⁴⁴ Owen, R. *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*, London; New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 198.

¹⁴⁵ Janowitz, M. *Military Institutions and Coercion in the Developing Nations*, University of Chicago Press, 1977, p. 91.

¹⁴⁶ Vatikiotis, P.J. *The History of Egypt*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980. Hurewitz, J. C. *Middle East politics: the Military Dimension*, New York, F. Praeger, 1969. Abdel Malek in Droz-Vincent, P. ‘From Political to Economic Actors: The Changing Role of Middle Eastern Armies. In: Oliver Sculmer’ (ed.): *Debating Arab Authoritarianism. Dynamics and durability in non democratic regimes*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007, p. 197. Nordlinger, E.A. *Soldiers in Politics: Military Coups and Governments*, Englewood Cliffs, London, Prentice-Hall, 1977.

coercive practices in order not to prevent the challenge from “organised counter-elites”¹⁴⁷.

More recently, other scholars, such as Sorenson, Droz-Vincent, and Springborg¹⁴⁸ have tried to deconstruct the military-civilian divide and explain more critically why the army increased its political involvement in post-colonial Egypt. They argue that it was caused by the military defence of their corporate interests and also to head off the weakening of the military’s capacity to prevent popular uprisings, which might result in significant structural changes. This book employs this argument in analysing the behaviour of the Egyptian military elite and its decision to intervene during the 2011 uprisings in order to assess the different patterns of demobilisation of the social proto-movements.

The Egyptian case is a good example, as Mitchell¹⁴⁹ argues more generally in reference to how state-society relations operate in authoritarian regimes, of how the blurred distinction between military and civilian elites has been used in order to generate power. Thus other social actors or elites have not held the same claim over economic power or to guarantee domestic unity. The officers, coming from relatively uniform and isolated backgrounds, appear as a united, prestigious and cohesive entity. This description of the military however masks its own political and structural divisions.

In Egypt the purported distinction between the military and the civilian political elites has been used as a cover to conceal the overlaps between these two realms. In other words, the military’s power depended on this bogus separation from the political elite. Gamal Abdel Nasser exchanged his military uniform for a civilian suit¹⁵⁰ but in so doing enhanced the army’s corporate interests. Later, the “corrective revolution”, encouraged by Sadat, was represented as an attempt to lessen the military’s political role but did not correspond to a significant change in the army’s political

¹⁴⁷ Janowitz, *Military institutions*, p. 15.

¹⁴⁸ Sorenson, D. *Interpreting the Middle East: essential themes*, Boulder CO, Westview Press, 2010, p. 134. Droz-Vincent, P. ‘From Political to Economic Actors: The Changing Role of Middle Eastern Armies’, in: Oliver Schlumber (ed.): *Debating Arab authoritarianism. Dynamics and Durability in Non Democratic Regimes*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007, Bill, J. and Springborg, R. *Politics in the Middle East*, 5th ed. New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 2000.

¹⁴⁹ Mitchell, T. ‘The Limits of the State: Beyond statist Approaches and Their Critics’, in, *The American Political Science Review* 85 (1), 1991, p. 90.

¹⁵⁰ Sorenson, *Interpreting the Middle East*, p. 136.

involvement¹⁵¹. More recently, in the period before his resignation few people still perceived Hosni Mubarak as a military ruler.

However, the political-civilian elite, after the 2011 demonstrations, needed the military's intervention for its own defence. As we shall see later, the first elected non-military President in Egyptian history, Mohamed Morsi, was rapidly abandoned by the military elites¹⁵² in order to restore the formerly near complete overlapping relationships between military and political elites so as to defend their corporate interests, and to accede to the pressures of other agents in the "Deep State", business cliques, the Coptic Church, and also to demobilise the social proto-movements, as well as to safeguard the geopolitical interests of Saudi Arabia.

3.1.1 The Military Junta and Major Unrest

In this section I further disentangle the workings of the Egyptian army and its political interventions, especially during popular unrest. Egypt is a more centralised state with a strong and well-established public apparatus (e.g. judges, military, police, bureaucracy and cultural institutions), compared to weaker states in the region such as Libya and Syria where the 2011 unrest ended up in civil wars. Egypt has low levels of peripheral power and lacks instruments of direct democracy¹⁵³.

In 2011, the army surprisingly decided to take the side of the protesters abandoning President Mubarak. Perhaps this happened because they did not favour the succession of Gamal, his son as the only person to share some power with his father, to be the new president. However, Gamal Mubarak did not have a solid military background and this was viewed with distrust by the military¹⁵⁴. The SCAF, led by Field Marshall Hussein Tantawi, was officially in charge from January 2011 to June 2012, when Morsi was elected. However, the military junta control over the political elites and the supervision over the transition process never ended.

This approach was meant to give some apparent concessions to the Muslim Brotherhood (e.g. Constitutional Declaration, Parliamentary and

¹⁵¹ Sorenson, *Interpreting the Middle East*, p. 138.

¹⁵² Pioppi, D. 'Playing with Fire. The Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian Leviathan', *The International Spectator*, Vol. 48, No. 4, December 2013, pp. 51–68.

¹⁵³ Della Porta, D. *Mobilizing for Democracy*, p. 229.

¹⁵⁴ Gelvin, J. *The Arab Uprisings*, Chapter 1.

Presidential elections). However, on June 30 2013, any controversy on how to handle the period of transition within the army disappeared in order to regain the complete control of the institutions with the military coup of July 3 2013. The separation of military and political functions was completely abandoned by the takeover of General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. In so doing, the military junta obtained total control over a closed Parliament (up to 2015), the judiciary, the Interior Ministry, the bureaucracy, some small political parties, a youth movement (*Tamarrod*) and trade unions. As al-Haddad argues in one of our interviews, “The military coup has been a retaliation of the old regime and the “Deep State”. The *Tamarrod* campaign unified the opposition' cliques: resentful citizens, public bureaucracy, the leaderless oppositions, families close to the National Democratic Party (NDP) and mercenaries. They portrayed it as a mass demonstration but they agreed only on a point: they did not want the Muslim Brotherhood in power”¹⁵⁵.

As seen before, this favoured a degree of internal corporate independence and facilitated several internal coups in order to control state institutions but in a context of total adherence towards the policies of the military junta, thus for example the former Minister of Interior, Mohammed Ibrahim, was suddenly dismissed without public explanations (2015); the former head of the Judges Club, Ahmed el-Zind, took over as Minister of Justice without a political debate (2015); other examples are the allegations of several plots within the army: in 2014 and 2015, Sami Annan and other 26 officials were accused of planning a military coup.

3.1.2 1952-54 vs. 2011-13: a Comparative Perspective

Military interference in politics is not new in Egyptian history. In this section, we will compare the military takeovers in 1952-54 and 2011-13. The relevance of this comparison for this book is to show how the Free Officers restored order in 1952, which has certain similarities with the SCAF's takeovers in 2011 and 2013¹⁵⁶. In Egypt the military personnel, confronted with major uprisings, have always intervened in order to defend the ruling elite, spreading fear and limiting political dissent by invoking the need for stability. In contrast, connections between Left-

¹⁵⁵ Interview 5.

¹⁵⁶ Zaalouk, M. *Power, Class and Foreign Capital in Egypt: the Rise of the New Bourgeoisie*, London, Zed Books, 1989.

wing, Liberal and Islamist oppositions were forged as a consequence of these bouts of political repression.

Popular demands for change erupted on January 1952 when a mob of students and activists burned down 750 buildings in Cairo during several demonstrations against the government and King Farouk. The British intervened with artillery in Ismailia, with the aim of destroying a weapons compound, which exacerbated these uprisings. A curfew and martial law were imposed. The urban unrest led to the Free Officers' (RCC) coup on July 23 1952. After four days, the RCC forced King Farouk to leave Egypt. In the following two years of transition, the officers consolidated their authority transforming the military coup into a "revolution from above"¹⁵⁷. By June 1953 they named a figurehead as president, Muhammed Naguib, and abrogated the constitution and suppressed political movements.

In 1954, Naguib was ousted and the Muslim Brotherhood, which initially participated to the protests, was outlawed. Many leftists initially perceived the RCC as closely echoing their political demands, as well as, trade unions, universities and professional associations, faced a crackdown. Those political groups and the *Wafdists*, experienced deep internal divisions over the issue of supporting or opposing the military takeover. Thus, the coup-makers, the Free Officers, were described by other oppositional groups as "masterly manipulators" after the abdication of King Farouk. In other words, as Marfleet states, "[Nasser and the Officers] enacted a decisive strike against the old regime; at the same time they were hostile to the movement that had facilitated their bid for power"¹⁵⁸.

3.1.3 Strategies of Repression during first Waves of Protests (2011-2013)

Bearing the events of 1952-1954 in mind, we can now turn to how the Egyptian military junta demobilised the revolutionary potential of the 2011 proto-movement. In 2011 in Egypt for the first time in 30 years, street vendors, urban poor, youth, football supporters, migrants, many women and workers formed a non-organised movement, performing "collective actions". In early 2011 the authorities tried to strangle the proto-movement as they had done successfully during the less universal

¹⁵⁷ Gordon, J. *Nasser's Blessed Movement. Egypt's Free Officers and the July Revolution*, New York: Oxford U.P., 1992, pp. 4-6.

¹⁵⁸ Marfleet, P. *Egypt: Contested Revolution*, pp.96-114.

revolts of 2005 and 2008. As a lieutenant colonel in the riot police recalled on the night of the January 25 the streets and squares “had to be cleaned up”¹⁵⁹.

According to witnesses, in a few hours, 200 vehicles, 50 buses and 10,000 riot police forced the people out of Tahrir Square. On January 27, police officials planned a shutdown of the Internet, mobile phones and a crackdown on bloggers and Internet activists¹⁶⁰. The following day, huge crowds gathered in the square of the main Egyptian towns again. The slogans were “Down with Hosni Mubarak!”, “The people want to overthrow the regime”. In several urban districts, the police sought to prevent ordinary people from joining the crowd or proceeded to make arbitrary arrests.

As Tripp explains:

In every city, the protests homed in on a range of different buildings and public sites associated with the regime, but also with aspects of Egyptian public life that had been curbed and repressed by the years of dictatorship. Thus, in Suez the ruling NDP building was surrounded and then set alight, police stations were besieged and the public spaces around government offices occupied. In Cairo, thousands converged on Tahrir Square, the central site of public demonstration in the shadow of the Mugamma and with the NDP headquarters looming in another corner. But there were also protests and demonstrations outside the main court buildings and the journalists' union – public institutions central to the rights of Egyptians, but dominated and cowed by the regime over the years. In a tactic designed to baffle, outmanoeuvre and overstretch the security forces, many of the protestors kept up a mobile form of demonstration, dissolving and reassembling to create flash-mobs across the city that the riot police found difficult to track, let alone to prevent or to suppress¹⁶¹.

On the night of January 28, the police appeared clearly unable to confront such diverse and huge crowds. Thus, the then Minister of Interior, Habib al-Adly, ordered the removal of the police from the “Street”. A curfew and martial law were imposed. According to the Arab Network for Human Rights, 841 people died on January 28 2011. Workers and poor from

¹⁵⁹ El-Ghobashy, M. ‘The Praxis of the Egyptian Revolution’, *Middle East Report* 258 (Spring 2011), pp. 1-7.

¹⁶⁰ Achcar, G. *The People Want*, p. 167.

¹⁶¹ Tripp, C. *The Power and the People, Paths of Resistance in the Middle East*, Cambridge, 2013, pp. 88-106.

deprived neighbourhood were those who paid the greatest price in loss of life and injury¹⁶².

As Tripp highlights, “On February 1, a week after the original demonstrations, some two to three million people came out on the streets across Egypt, reclaiming public space and showing their defiance with their voices” [...] “Tahrir Square had become the symbolic epicentre of the uprising [...] The Square itself had become a focus not simply of protest and demonstration, but also of debate, entertainment and sociability [...] a popular assembly in constant session”¹⁶³.

With the police no longer present, the uprisings continued with attacks on police stations, National Democratic Party (NDP) headquarters, State Security buildings, municipal councils, governors’ offices and utility buildings. The same night, groups of criminals, known as *baltagi*, suddenly appeared, especially in poor neighbourhoods. This suggested that, as many witnesses attested, policemen and members of the ruling NDP paid these groups directly. Ordinary people, political activists and Muslim Brothers created self-defence groups or Popular Committees in many neighbourhoods to protect homes from possible attacks.

In order to demobilise the revolutionary potential of the proto-movement, poor neighbourhoods suddenly became chaotic. This suggests that, as it happened in previous mobilisations, criminals and infiltrators were extensively used as public agents in order to spread fear, arrest foreigners – in other words, to trigger a real fight between the state and ordinary people¹⁶⁴.

As Alaa Abdel Fattah recalls in one of our interviews for this book, since the beginning of the uprisings and over all of 2011:

The civil resistance movements continued their struggle. They were engaged in simple self-defence actions. In Tahrir’s sit-ins there were street children and spontaneous poor who would like to see some achievements from the Revolution. On the other hand, there were men infiltrated by the army, often in plain clothes, who triggered the clashes. The same people infiltrated Popular Committees during the uprisings and the Agouza’s

¹⁶² Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 197.

¹⁶³ Tripp, C. *The Power and the People*, pp. 88-106.

¹⁶⁴ Ismail, S. *Political Life in Cairo’s New Quarters*, Chapter 6.

demonstrations on August 29 2011. Those infiltrators began setting fire to the Institut d'Egypt from the roof on December 17 2011¹⁶⁵.

After three days the military personnel reacted, the army's tanks began to control all the roads heading to Tahrir Square. As a soldier, who entered in Tahrir Square that day, explained: "The country was out of control. We had the order to go to the Square and not to shoot at the protesters. We were welcomed by the crowd in the Square: they gave me flowers and fruits. I will never forget this day. Moreover, I would never use force against people belonging to my family"¹⁶⁶.

On February 2, thousands of people paid by the NDP converged on Tahrir Square, some riding horses and camels, armed with iron bars and stones attacking the protesters. As Tripp argued, "This turn of events re-energised the protests. People demonstrated their outrage at the methods used by the regime, showing that they were determined to maintain their protests on a scale as great as or even greater than before"¹⁶⁷.

The military was already in the position of being the saviour of the national interest, the only power that, intervening, could entail order, guarantee the ruling elite and restore stability¹⁶⁸. On February 10, SCAF issued "Communiqué Number One" supporting the legitimate rights of the people to protest.

Even if the levels of repression did not have univocal effects on the levels of mobilisation¹⁶⁹, the Egyptian army had clearly perceived that an initial accommodative strategy towards the protesters (and later on with the Muslim Brotherhood government) was not successful in demobilising the proto-movement, especially within the factories, as we shall see later. Then, they gradually decided to prevent again any form of dissent.

All kinds of paramilitary groups, ranging from the military police to State Security agents were deployed. As Janowitz highlighted, since national independence, the growth of paramilitary forces paralleled the development

¹⁶⁵ Interview 21.

¹⁶⁶ Interview 8.

¹⁶⁷ Tripp, C. *The Power and the People*, pp. 88-106.

¹⁶⁸ Droz-Vincent, P. 'A Return of Armies to the Forefront of Arab Politics?', *IAI Working Papers*. Available online at <http://www.iai.it/pdf/DocIAI/iaiwp1121.pdf>, last time accessed on September 2014.

¹⁶⁹ Della Porta, D. *Mobilizing for Democracy*, p. 238.

of their functions, structures and coercive methods¹⁷⁰. It is plausible that, to restore order, the army made extensive use of policemen too. This explains the extent to which the army, as the major entity of order, was ready, overtly or on the sly, to activate the police in order to defend the political elite. This renewed alliance between army and police, or better put, between Interior and Defence Ministries, not necessarily in place during Mubarak's time, clearly surfaced with the June 30 2013 anti-Muslim Brotherhood protests. The dynamics behind these events confirmed the extent to which the Egyptian armed forces were and are rooted in state institutions and how much the military is able to intervene employing its formal and informal apparatuses, as well as instrumentalising other forces, when the status quo is threatened¹⁷¹.

It was in these circumstances that the army decided to abandon the then President Hosni Mubarak. Despite his reluctance to resign, the military clearly wanted to remove him. Mubarak could only remain in charge until he was not a threat to the established order. Protestors remained in Tahrir Square until the announcement of Mubarak's resignation was made on February 11 2011 and the military junta officially took over.

As Tripp explains, "The resignation of the president, dramatic as it appeared, was just the beginning [...] (Many knew that) Tantawi and others on the SCAF were themselves clients and long-time associates of the departed president and strongly suspected therefore that they would not willingly oversee radical changes on the dispensation of power"¹⁷².

At this stage, the SCAF attempted to modify the demands arising from the "Egyptian Street", to highlight its role in the maintenance of order and generally institutionalise the movement in the transition to a new regime. However, many young soldiers expressed strong support for the protesters (their relevance will be discussed in the next section). As Interviewee 10 stated, "I am against the SCAF, I was in a barracks room with other 20 soldiers in Salah Salem"¹⁷³. When I had the chance, I went to Tahrir Square with my military comrades, although it has been strictly forbidden by the officers. Nobody confessed that to the generals when they arrested us"¹⁷⁴.

¹⁷⁰ Janowitz, *Military Institutions*, pp. 5 and 70.

¹⁷¹ Aydinli, E. 'A Paradigmatic Shift for the Turkish Generals and an End to the Coup Era in Turkey', *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (Autumn, 2009) p. 582.

¹⁷² Tripp, C. *The Power and the People*, pp. 88-106.

¹⁷³ Salah Salem is a popular district of southern Cairo.

¹⁷⁴ Interview 10.

For instance, an individual soldier (at that time a deserter) supporting the revolutionaries, in a demonstration at the Syndicate of Journalists in Ramses Street (2011), argued: “During the last evenings, many soldiers switched off the electricity in the barracks for hours. The day later, the officers found insulting graffiti in several rooms. For these reasons, many soldiers were harshly punished”¹⁷⁵.

The night of January 28 is vital to understand how the need of stability was stimulated by the action of army officers. This pattern of action was constantly reproduced before the 2013 military coup, with the use of relatively small amounts of violence, in order to stop further demonstrations, except during the clashes at *Maspero* (State-Television building) in October 2011 and during the Port Said massacre of February 2012. In both cases, the role of the military junta in triggering the violence was evident and had been confirmed by many witnesses. The military did not intervene in many sectarian clashes between Copts and Muslims that broke out in different Cairo districts (e.g. Moqattam, Helwan, Embaba and Maspero) from February to October 2011. As a Port Said policeman confirmed in one of our interviews: “They were ordered not to search the football supporters when they entered into the stadium. Moreover when the clashes started the lights were suddenly switched off. They were even ordered to close all the entrances to prevent Al-Ahly supporters from leaving the pitch”¹⁷⁶.

The lack of police intervention suggested that this was retaliation against the role played by the Al-Ahly Ultras¹⁷⁷ during the demonstrations. Thus as the blogger and activists Wael Abbas confirms: “The Revolution did not succeed, people still disappear. Some of them have been tortured and not justly tried. Thus, SCAF hampered the autonomous development of the Revolution. We thought that the Mubarak removal was enough, but it is the role of the army, which presents itself as neutral, that should be discussed”¹⁷⁸.

¹⁷⁵ Interview 9.

¹⁷⁶ Interview 10.

¹⁷⁷ Gibril, S. 'Contentious Politics and Bottom-Up Mobilization in Revolutionary Egypt: the Case of Egyptian Football Supporters in Cairo' in Gerges, F. A., *Contentious Politics in the Middle East Popular Resistance and Marginalized Activism beyond the Arab Uprisings*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 324.

¹⁷⁸ Interview 11.

Thus, the methods used by the military junta to create a need for stability were diverse and subtle. Firstly, they implemented military trials for civilians. Secondly, state-television programmes constantly discredited demonstrators. Thirdly, they tried to discourage women participation in the protests in different ways, through rapes and harassment¹⁷⁹ (carried out on a massive scale, not only by the security forces but by other Islamists and ordinary people too), and virginity tests. Moreover, anal tests for alleged gay' activists were also carried out.

Fourthly, a huge number of arbitrary arrests and summoning to court of journalists and protesters were put in place. Fifthly, violent searches of NGOs were carried out followed by their closure. Sixthly, public spaces were partitioned with walls and barbed wire fences. But to make sure that the political elite was not threatened, SCAF adopted many other measures: precipitous electoral procedures, the constitutional referendum, the electoral laws and the elimination of candidates for the presidency, culminating with the closure of the Parliament (June 2012).

As Marfleet highlights,

Police and security agencies had seen compelled to retreat and for the first time in decades most neighbourhoods, workplaces and campuses enjoyed freedom from constant surveillance [...] These gains were modest, however, and fell far short of demands raised in countless strikes and protests. The government had enacted political reform – but guidingly and according to limits established by the armed forces command, which still held power. The dictator had gone but the dictatorship was in place¹⁸⁰.

3.1.4 Strategies of Repression before and after the Military Coup (2013-2015)

In this section, I discuss how the army intervened in order to stop the initial political transition, on July 3 2013, eventually, forging a military regime. In other words, as Bassiouny and Alexander argue, “the generals were able to turn the contradictions between social and democratic aspects [...] to their advantage”¹⁸¹.

¹⁷⁹ AI, “Circles of Hell'. Domestic, Public and State Violence against Women in Egypt', *Amnesty International Report*, 2015. Available at: http://www.amnestyusa.org/sites/default/files/mde_120042015.pdf. Last accessed on 10 October 2015.

¹⁸⁰ Marfleet, P. *Egypt: Contested Revolution*, pp. 72-74.

¹⁸¹ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 14.

The military elite forged and infiltrated the *Tamarrod* (Rebel) campaign against Morsi (May 2013). Many youngsters in this group were already working for the Secret Services (*Mukabarat*) and the Military Intelligence before joining the campaign that led to Morsi's dismissal¹⁸². On June 30 2013, a huge demonstration took place in Tahrir Square, supported by the police, the judiciary, the Coptic Church, the public and many private media, former NDP politicians, the elders among Socialists and Liberals, intellectuals and triggered by the *Tamarrod* (Rebel) campaign, infiltrated by the Military Intelligence.

Within 48 hours, President Mohammed Morsi was asked to resign. On July 3, he was arrested by the Presidential Guard and detained for months in a secret location without clear charges. This was the beginning of the restored army rule, with the support of Saudi capitalists¹⁸³ and the main local *Salafi* groups, the launch of a long-lasting interim government, as stated in the military backed "roadmap" which included the figurehead, Adli Mansur, the head of the Supreme Court, as the acting president, and the beginning of a new relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin, which has served as one of pillars of Egyptian foreign policy. Meanwhile, the re-mobilised Popular Committees were banned by the Interior Ministry, as we will further discuss.

At this stage defining these events as a military takeover was considered problematic by many observers. Initially, media accounts presented the demonstration on June 30 2013 as a popular unrest similar to the protests of January 25 2011. Some analysts added creative adjectives defining it as a "popular" or "democratic" coup. Later, other academic works (Owen, Bayat, Alexander)¹⁸⁴ defined the army takeover on July 3 as a military coup. Drawing upon this approach, as in part discussed hitherto and more extensively tackled in the Conclusion, I will explain, especially in reference to the activation and then banning of Popular Committees and independent trade unions, that this process of military interventionism to hinder the potential of the revolutionary movement started long before this day, perhaps already on January 28 2011 when the army's tanks began to control all the roads heading to Tahrir Square.

As Owen explains in an interview for this book, "The army intervened in order to stop the popular mobilisation; they say that they did that in the

¹⁸² Marfleet, P. *Egypt: Contested Revolution*, pp. 154-174.

¹⁸³ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 33.

¹⁸⁴ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 14.

name of the people but they only wanted to bring the people back home. The same process happened during the French Revolution”¹⁸⁵.

Likewise, these events determined a temporary re-mobilisation of the Muslim Brotherhood’s non-violent demonstrations in order to support the legitimacy of the Morsi presidency with sit-ins in the main squares of all the major Egyptian cities. However, the Muslim Brotherhood did not want a violent confrontation with the army. Thus they organised peaceful demonstrations, marches and flash-mobs throughout the country. In Cairo this happened in Rab’a al-Adawiya (Medinat Nasser) and al-Nahda (Giza); similar peaceful protests were organised in Minya (Meidan Palace), Assyut (Meidan Omar Akram), Alexandria and Suez (Meidan Arbain).

As Abbas highlights in one of our interviews:

The army acted in a more devious way than Mubarak. The military personnel incited the crowd against the Brotherhood, they did not intervene to avoid clashes and defended who wanted to kill the Islamists. Many Egyptian followed *Tamarrod* but it was not a political group, it was a petition campaign. I suspect they were in connivance with the Security Services and lacked political awareness. Did they support the military coup? They don’t remember what the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) ruling meant for us (the revolutionaries) over the last two years? We do not have to confuse *Tamarrod* with the Coalition of Revolutionary Youth. In their public interventions *Tamarrod* supported the army interferences. The revolutionaries would never have supported the police and a military coup, even if backed by the crowd (sic)¹⁸⁶.

On August 14 2013, the security forces, after a controversial decision taken by the former Interior Ministry, Mohammed Ibrahim, who had been appointed by Morsi himself, and in coordination with the military junta, as well as the acting Prime Minister and the then head of the Armed Forces, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, attacked the Rab’a al-Adawiya and al-Nahda’s encampments. Hundreds of people were killed or disappeared during these days¹⁸⁷. Those events clearly revealed the aggressive nature of the military-police’s takeover, probably, paving the way for a less popular

¹⁸⁵ Interview 12.

¹⁸⁶ Interview 11.

¹⁸⁷ HRW, 'All According to Plan. The Rab’a Massacre and Mass Killings of Protesters in Egypt', *Human Rights Watch Report*, August 2014. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/12/all-according-plan/raba-massacre-and-mass-killings-protesters-egypt>. Last time accessed on 24 October 2015.

image of the Egyptian army, as confirmed by the very low turn-outs at the 2014 and 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections.

As Zubaida adds in an interview for this book, “After the coup 41, 000 people have been arrested, hundreds of detainees have been tortured, many activists have been illegally arrested, unconstitutional laws have been approved; the army privileges have grown, the military personnel received extra payments, many contracts have been granted to factories controlled by the army; a fascist, extremist and xenophobic political discourse has grown”¹⁸⁸.

The political role of the judiciary in limiting the demands of the protesters, both Islamists and other political groups, was particularly evident at this stage of the repression with hundreds of death sentences pronounced against the Muslim Brotherhood leaders and supporters and life sentences against other protesters, while NGOs were searched or closed, and the censorship of the independent media was put in place (including the notorious *Al-Jazeera* trial). On the role of the judiciary in the repression process, in an interview for this book, Seif al-Islam argues, “The Egyptian judiciary is an instrument to prevent political participation. Since 2006, we fought for a real independence of the judges from the government. Nowadays, the judges are still dependent on the security apparatus. And justice is used as a political tool against the enemies of the regime. The judges work to please al-Sisi. Sometimes they do that even without specific orders but only to serve the regime. It is only with the re-organisation of the army's role in politics that a democratic society can emerge”¹⁸⁹.

In this restored military regime, after the closure of public markets, the expulsion of street vendors and the cleansing of downtown buildings, some forms of irrelevant dissent have been tolerated. However, all the charities of the Muslim Brotherhood, its hospitals, its NGOs, its associations and its media outlets have been either closed down, or have faced noticeable levels of repression or the removal of its former management. The Society of the Muslim Brotherhood, its political party the FJP and the coalition defending Morsi government's legitimacy have been outlawed by the Egyptian courts. The Islamist movements within the

¹⁸⁸ Interview 2.

¹⁸⁹ Interview 23.

universities have been heavily repressed (especially on the Al-Azhar and Ayn Shamps campuses).

The political leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood have been stigmatised as full-fledged terrorists. The recent major episodes of political repression and terrorism – the al-Fateh Mosque clashes (2013), the October 6 clashes (2013), the attack on the Mansoura police station (2013), the third Tahrir Square anniversary (2014), bombings of the Islamic Art Museum (2014), the assassination of the General Prosecutor (2015) and several murders of groups of people who were allegedly Muslim Brotherhood supporters (2015) – along with the never ending violence in the Sinai, where a curfew and emergency law have been imposed - are claimed by the acting government to be the responsibility of the Muslim Brotherhood or carried out by the Security forces to eradicate other terrorist organisations.

At this stage, it is not the aim of this research to discuss the issue of state terrorism. However, it is enough to argue that, considering the timing and locations where some of these events took place, many independent journalists and analysts (Filiu)¹⁹⁰ have highlighted the overlapping responsibilities of some branches of the military Intelligence and the State Security (*Amn el-Dawla*) in collusion with radical Islamists in triggering a permanent need for political repression. It has been argued by some observers that such a “strategy of tension” has been used by the post-coup ruling elite in order to counter-balance its lack of democratic legitimacy.

However, it is important to note that the social services provided by the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s and 1990s, a sort of second social state in Egypt, has been partially replaced by an unmitigated diffuse condition of poverty among the lower strata of immigrants and other people, marginalised by the neo-liberal policies of Mubarak, Morsi and Sisi. Although these subaltern classes were the real protagonists of the 2011 uprisings and continue their everyday struggles against the brutal practices of the State, the question might be raised as why this *lumpen proletariat* did not find any noticeable representation within movements on the Left¹⁹¹? A possible answer might be the widespread lack of education¹⁹², political awareness and a complete mistrust of party politics and electoral procedures within the subaltern classes, which was not addressed by leftist activists, present in the “Egyptian Street”, and only marginally addressed

¹⁹⁰ Filiu, J. P. *From Deep State to Islamic State*, Chapter 7.

¹⁹¹ Interview 7.

¹⁹² Interview 17.

through post-Islamist capitalist discourse¹⁹³ in the wake of 2011. Therefore it is understandable how in the conditions of the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings, a nationalist and “neo-Nasserist” political discourse has been able to integrate and co-opt left-wing ideology. This happened because post-Islamist ideology appeared less able to address the demands of the “Street” than the army, as we will discuss in the next section.

Following the 2013 military coup, all manner of political activism and political pluralism has been repressed in Egypt. The resilience of the “Deep State”, the restoration of the privileges of the ruling elite of the National Democratic Party (NDP) and their traditional form of crony capitalism have weakened the ability of alternative movements to exercise an influence on civil society. However, the 2011 political mobilisation did enhance the space for new forms of protection for specific interests or single issues. This is the case with the opening of human rights or labour rights institutions such as the Arab Reform Initiative¹⁹⁴ and the Centre for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR)¹⁹⁵.

Thus, the incompatibility between the Muslim Brotherhood and other oppositional movements, especially on the Left, in the context of absence of control of the security apparatuses, contributed to isolate the Muslim Brotherhood from other oppositional forces, preparing the ground for a military coup. In other words, other oppositional groups saw the temporary alliance of the military and the Muslim Brotherhood as a counter-revolutionary agreement. The Muslim Brotherhood was in fact isolated because it shunned a suitable alliance with the “Street” and other oppositional forces and relied on an agreement with the military, which the army saw as an alliance of convenience and had no intention of allowing the Muslim Brotherhood to rule without constant supervision. On the occasion of the 2011 uprisings, the Egyptian army intervened to restore order. The SCAF, firstly, attempted to preserve the ruling elite, secondly, triggered a need for stability in different ways to stop the proto-movement.

In this section we have discussed how, during the Egyptian 2011 uprisings, more fragile political actors, such as Left-wing groups and alternative networks had been demobilised. These findings are vital to

¹⁹³ Della Porta, D. *Mobilizing for Democracy*, p. 148.

¹⁹⁴ This party is led by a former Muslim Brother's leader and presidential candidate (2012): Moneim Abu el-Fotuh.

¹⁹⁵ Former presidential candidate and lawyer Khaled Ali is the director if the Centre.

later discuss how civil society activities, in general terms, and more importantly for the two case studies of this book, Popular Committees and independent trade unions vanished after the military takeover. In the next part, the role of ideology in fostering this process will be assessed.

3.2 Ideology: “Social Justice” in Egypt

Citing the relevant secondary literature and interviews carried out for this book, this section will evaluate the slogan of 2011: “Bread, Freedom and Social Justice” and the missed possibility to forge a “collective identity” between Islamists, the “Egyptian Street” and other oppositional movements. In doing so, I will explain, in more general terms, how workers' movements have been demobilised in the interests of the management of the main Egyptian factories, governed by businessmen with military backgrounds.

Many scholars have underestimated the role played by workers' movements, alternative networks and other civil society agencies during and after the 2011 uprisings. However, we draw upon other approaches (Beinin, Gelvin, Alexander)¹⁹⁶ that considered the major political changes which have occurred recently in Egypt as directly triggered by the spread of labour protests. As Alexander and Bassiouny argue, the roots of the 2011 uprisings lay “in the transformation of the relationships between the state, capital and labour that took place over the previous 35 years on both a local and a global scale”¹⁹⁷. In other words, the “social soul” of the Egyptian 2011 unrest “was a critical element from the start”¹⁹⁸. As they explain,

Through their self-organised collective action, workers asserted the centrality of the social aspect of the revolution, in confrontation with the reformist political forces such as the Muslim Brotherhood, who hoped to restrict its scope to a limited democratic transition. This continuation of the workers' revolt was the key factor in the destabilisation of the post-Mubarak political settlement between the Brotherhood and the generals of the old regime¹⁹⁹.

An initial answer to the question why the demands for “Social Justice” did not forge a collective identity between the diverse political antagonists,

¹⁹⁶ Gelvin, J. *The Arab Uprisings*, pp. 56-57.

¹⁹⁷ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 5.

¹⁹⁸ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 11.

¹⁹⁹ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 193.

might be that, on the one hand, “the revolutionary movement lacked real roots in the workplaces”²⁰⁰, and, on the other hand, the main responsibilities of this failure were due to the Muslim Brotherhood’ leaders who were not considered by other oppositional groups as genuinely defending the subalterns.

As the former presidential candidate and ECESR’s director Khaled Ali outlined during our interview for this book:

The Muslim Brotherhood did not want to bring ‘Social Justice’ but they just wanted to promote state aids. The 2012 Constitution, voted by the Brotherhood, was dangerous for social rights. Workers’ organisations could have disappeared and it would have been tougher to form new trade unions. This is against the International Labour Organisation’s rules. According to their constitution, if the board of a trade union was perceived as responsible for penal or civil crimes it could have been dissolved. But this was not the case for the professionals’ unions where the Brotherhood had the majority²⁰¹.

However, one of the reasons why “Social Justice” did not become the main target of the oppositional groups is related to the way in which the army and the “Deep State” diverted the social demands of the proto-movements from Political Islam to a faux Neo-Nasserism.

3.2.1 The Heritage of Gamal Abdel Nasser

What does Nasserism mean for the Egyptian people? Gamal Abdel Nasser’s pictures were among the first items Tahrir’s street vendors sold in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings. His popularity, as an Egyptian national hero, has never diminished. But the army as a whole, embodied in the SCAF, wanted to be represented as his legitimate successor once they decided to support the “revolution”. This “popular” side of the army, in poor neighbourhoods, took the form, for instance, of butchers receiving meat from the military factories that was sold at half price to the public.

The popularity of the Egyptian army has been longstanding. The seizure of power by junior army officers in 1952 under the leadership of Gamal Abdel Nasser represented just such an attempt to overcome the blockage imposed by the political alliance between the colonial power (Britain) and

²⁰⁰ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 193.

²⁰¹ Interview 18.

large landowners, led by the royal family²⁰². Firstly, the political economy of Nasser's regime was a form of state capitalism, “made necessary by the crisis of accumulation which the Egyptian ruling class had failed to solve”²⁰³. Secondly, independent workers' organisations and Left-wing political parties “emerged for the first time from the shadow of liberal nationalism”²⁰⁴. However, Nasser pursued the “political suppression of the workers' movement with its social incorporation”²⁰⁵.

The agrarian reform, approved by Gamal Abdel Nasser, denuded the large landowners. If in 1950, 72% of the landholders held 6.2% of the agricultural land. In 1952, 94.4% of the landowners held 46.6% of the land²⁰⁶. A semi-feudal oligarchy was forced to abandon its privileges in favour of a rural middle class. Likewise, public assistance and minimum wages for peasants and workers were established. Those policies contributed to “demobilise the working class”²⁰⁷. After the RCC took over, other anti-regime movements, especially the popular support enjoyed by the Communists and the Muslim Brotherhood, were perceived as a danger, although many officers sympathised or were aligned to them. The Communists were persecuted and marginalised by the RCC throughout 1953. For instance, the workers, who participated in the Kafr al Dawwar strikes, were depicted by the junta as “enemies of the revolution”²⁰⁸: an agency of disorder.

Thus, the army in Egypt acted as a force against the working class long before the 2011 uprisings. Since the 1919 workers' movements, the military has operated as an anti-revolutionary institution. As seen before, if the Free Officers and the SCAF intervened in 1952 and 2011 in favour of the ruling elite, it is primarily due to the defence of its corporate economic achievements. On the one hand, the agrarian reform promoted by Nasser did not undermine military interests, on the other hand, a policy of nationalisation and, afterwards, liberalisation extensively increased the influence of the military in the Egyptian economy. Rather, paradoxically a

²⁰² Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 5

²⁰³ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p.37.

²⁰⁴ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 38.

²⁰⁵ Interview 2.

²⁰⁶ Beinín, J. *Workers and Peasants in the Middle East*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 119, 132, 173.

²⁰⁷ Beinín, J. *Workers and Peasants*, pp. 254-255.

²⁰⁸ Gordon, J. *Nasser's Blessed Movement*, p. 99.

less pervasive state gradually enhanced the role of military personnel both in public, semi-private and private sectors.

Finally, intertwined military and civilian elites forged a “military society”²⁰⁹ and a military economy. If, on the one hand, due to the *infatih* policies, the military elites were increasingly transformed into a business class, on the other hand, with the permanent threat of regional wars, the Egyptian army increasingly controlled budget allocations and US aid²¹⁰. As a matter of fact, the military personnel became editors of major national newspapers. They began to control production factories for civilian goods ranging from washing machines to pharmaceuticals, branching out from the traditional military industries which produced weapons, equipment and military technologies. The army developed dairy farms, fisheries, meat production and bakeries. Moreover, the military became involved in the tourist industry, controlling hotels and resorts. Finally, they were engaged in black markets, smuggling facilities and often retired military officers had seats on the boards of private companies.

For all these reasons, the military has been favoured and less affected by the consequences of the *infatih* policies than other groups, which have experienced economic inequalities and lack of welfare provision. Thus, the army has constantly increased its economic weight as a parasitic actor, thanks to the advantages accorded by the ruling elite: cheap manpower, monopolistic rights, privileges on tax exemptions and house building regulations, and subsidies. These elements contributed to the building-up of the military's corporate interests.

3.2.2 Strikes and Workers' Movements

The need of the Egyptian army to defend these economic privileges became clearer during and after the 2011 uprisings. The army argued that this restored interventionism was in the interests of the people and the

²⁰⁹ Abdel Malek in Droz-Vincent, P. 'From Political to Economic Actors: The Changing Role of Middle Eastern Armies'. In: Oliver Schumber (ed.): *Debating Arab authoritarianism. Dynamics and durability in non democratic regimes*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007, p. 197.

²¹⁰ The budgetary privileges of the Egyptian army apparently are not in decline and the US aides are constantly confirmed and augmented. Rubin, B. 'The military in Contemporary Middle East Politics'. In: Barry M. Rubin, Thomas A. Keaney (eds.): *Armed forces in the Middle East. Politics and strategy*, Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2002, pp. 1-22.

middle classes, in the name of Egyptian nationalism and on the same path of the Nasser's 1952 revolutionary coup. However, the real aim of this renewed military intervention in politics had nothing to do with Nasserism, "Social Justice" or labour rights.

Thus, in this section, I look at the pivotal role of workers' movements during the 2011 uprisings. As Alexander and Bassiouny highlight "the strikes demanding the 'cleansing' of the state apparatus, as they raised the prospect of new forms of democratic control over the existing state institutions from below, were particularly threatening to the interests of the old regime, precisely because they fused both political and social demands with workers' social power"²¹¹.

During the presidency of Anwar al-Sadat, and the former colonel, Hosni Mubarak, Nasser's agrarian reforms were dismantled. The redistributive functions of the public sector disappeared, along with the cutting of wages and the prolonging of working hours²¹². Yet left-wing and workers' movements were increasingly weakened because they also participated in the formulation of these policies of liberalisation. After the crackdown on the 1977 and 1984-5 strikes, military and political elites tried to present all the demands coming from a left-wing background, or advocating labour rights, as already integrated in the ruling elite and overlapping with its nationalism²¹³.

As Tripp explains, "In 1977, the decision by the Egyptian government to introduce some of the required price reforms by cutting subsidies on flour, sugar, cooking oil, petrol and butagas provoked an immediate and outraged response by hundreds of thousands of Egyptians [...] Starting in 1977, these were protests against the erosion of living standards and of workers' rights"²¹⁴.

As a consequence of the constant repression of labour protests, in 2000, left-wing groups and other parties supporting workers' rights seemed have been quashed. However, as Beinín states, the strikes continued to take place in many industries (e.g. the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company in Mahalla al-Kubra):

²¹¹ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 207.

²¹² Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, pp. 45-46.

²¹³ Interview 2.

²¹⁴ Tripp, C. *The Power and the People*, pp. 139-162.

From 1998 to 2009 over two million workers participated in more than 3,300 factory occupations, strikes, demonstrations or other collective actions. With notable democratic internal practices, union activism bridged specific claims to Arab socialist frames or Islamic notions of moral economy. Much protest developed in the 2000s usually around bread and butter issues but becoming later politicised. Labour protests followed each neo-liberal turn in the government [...] Egyptian workers have not received the message that class struggle is unfashionable²¹⁵.

Thus, the workers were among the protagonists of the 2011 uprisings but, later on, even when the general political atmosphere was still liberal, SCAF did not allow them to reorganise organisational structures within firms. In the aftermath of 2011, the role of the army as an agent of anti-working class policies emerged again²¹⁶. As the Revolutionary Socialist activist, Hossam el-Hamalawy argues in an interview for this book: “The workers' movement had been spontaneously activated, independently from the street protests. However, the repression of the labour movement never ended because in the transition phase, the workers' demonstrations expressed a sharp opposition to the military government and the militarisation of the management of the major Egyptian industries”²¹⁷.

As Gelvin writes, labour protests had a key role in the 2011 uprisings and in its aftermath. During turning points in the 2011 uprisings, along with street demonstrations taking place, the activation of Popular Committees, there was the parallel spread of workers' protests, often supported by the independent trade unions.

Thus, the greatest waves of street demonstrations witnessed a similar increase of conflict in labour movements. This happened the day before the Mubarak resignation on February 11 2011. Gelvin explains:

In Egypt, where protest leaders and the labour movement had an intertwined history, tens of thousands of workers from both public and private sectors, including those from the petroleum, railroad, banking, retail, manufacturing, public transportation, health care, and heavy industry sectors, struck on February 10, 2011, and joined protesters on the streets of most major cities. In the volatile textile industry, 18, 000 workers left their jobs, and walkouts shut down the Cairo airport and stock

²¹⁵ Beinín, J. in Della Porta, D. *Mobilizing for Democracy*, p. 98.

²¹⁶ Interview 1.

²¹⁷ Interview 1.

exchange. All this took place the day before the army told Mubarak he had to go²¹⁸.

As Alexander and Bassiouny confirm, “in the days immediately following Mubarak's fall there were between 40 and 60 strikes per day”²¹⁹. But even in contexts of lower or decreasing political mobilisation, there have still been periods when strikes have been broadly disseminated.

Table X shows the number of workers' protests shortly before the 2011 uprisings and the 2013 military coup.

Table X: Number of Workers' Protests before the 2011 Uprisings and the 2013 Military Coup

Years/Months	Number of workers' protests
2007-2010	550
May 2011	103
June 2011	95
July 2011	75
August 2011	89
September 2011	58
February 2013	359
March 2013	334
April 2013	461
May 2013	450

Source: Our elaboration on Benin 2010, Adil 2012, Alexander 2014

Thus, to return to Alexander and Bassiouny, “Instead of the waves of strikes and apparent signs of workers' self-organisation which preceded the June 30 protests paving the way for a new phase of the revolution, it was counter-revolutionary forces, led by the military, which reaped the benefits”²²⁰. In this second case, workers' movements pushed the military elite to be concerned about the consequences of the Muslim Brotherhood's neoliberal policies.

In a further phase, the spread workers' strikes brought about by a reshuffle within the interim government (2014) with the end of the Hazem

²¹⁸ Gelvin, J. *The Arab Uprisings What Everyone needs to Know*, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 56-57.

²¹⁹ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 200.

²²⁰ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 14.

Beblawi's cabinet and the beginning of a long-lasting premiership of Ibrahim Mahleb.

3.2.3 The Alleged Neo-Nasserism of the Interim Government

In this section I will focus on the army's self-depiction of its takeover in 2013 as a reaction in the defence of the social demands of the 2011 uprisings. All the aforementioned episodes, along with the electoral appeal of the so-called "neo-Nasserist" candidate at the presidential elections (2012), Hamdin Sabbahi, are vital in order to understand why Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, once in power, wanted to be represented as a new Gamal Abdel Nasser. To a certain extent, after the strongest crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood in the history of contemporary Egypt, he tried to give to his presidency a pseudo-leftist appearance. For instance, it is true that many Egyptian socialist intellectuals²²¹, on the eve of the military coup, supported the army's intervention against the Muslim Brotherhood. Moreover, despite the repression, the army allowed the old fashioned leftist parties with small followings (the Social Democrats, the Social Alliance, *Tagammu* and Popular Current) to partake in legal political action as the coup.

As Tripp²²² argues, although the interim government's economic policies have nothing to do either with Nasserism or with socialism, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi needed to represent his actions as informed by the demands originating from the "Egyptian Street" and the labour movements. But after the military coup, restrictions of the activities of the independent trade unions were approved and the prohibition of strikes within the factories was imposed²²³. With the Sharm el-Sheikh Forum (March 2015) and the opening of an extension of the Suez Canal (August 2015)²²⁴, al-Sisi reinforced the traditional type of crony capitalism, so prevalent during the Mubarak regime. Cutting subsidies, attracting private and foreign investments, financing great public works became the main features of the political ideology of al-Sisi's bogus Neo-Nasserism, which

²²¹ Interviews 7 and 18.

²²² Tripp, C. *The Power and the People*, pp. 139-162.

²²³ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, pp. 50-52.

²²⁴ At the presence of the Russian Prime Minister, Dmitry Medvedev, the Socialist French President, François Hollande, and the Greek Prime Minister, Alexis Tsipras, to try to validate and reinforce his "neo-Nasserist" political discourse.

was in fact deeply at variance with Nasser agrarian reforms and his foreign policy²²⁵. As Tripp notes,

The government had made enormous efforts not simply to suppress resistance, but also to portray it as embodying the very features that had necessitated economic restructuring in the first place. It was made to stand for the forces of reaction associated with the discredited state-centric system of the 'Socialist era'. It was also characterised as incubating the forces of anarchism and disorder – a common feature of capital's portrayal of labour²²⁶.

It is clear that the Egyptian pan-Arabism of Nasser differed significantly if compared to the SCAF's political discourse. Nasser's idea of nationalism had the aim to promote inter-Arab cooperation (a “united *umma*”) as an alternative to the alliance with the West²²⁷. However, the instrumental nationalism promoted by the former President Hosni Mubarak and, in continuity, by the SCAF, appears less ambitious and synonymous with populism. With widespread recourse to flags and hymns, the Egyptian political and military elite promoted the elimination of any political opposition, an Islamisation from above, relaying on the financial support of international organisations (e.g. IMF, WB) and a rooted military alliance with Israel and the US.

In a similar fashion, al-Sisi tried initially to promote himself as not dependent on US aid, albeit 1.3 billion dollars per year of aid had been re-established in 2015. He tried to represent the 2013 military coup as a decision taken against US interests in the region, nurturing a strengthened relationship with the Russian government. He has been militarily aggressive (for example, attacks in Libya and Yemen, the support to Israel in the 2013 Operation Protective Edge) appealing to a rooted chauvinist form of nativism (so for instance, Syrian and Palestinian refugees have been left without citizenship), added to consistent support for the monarchy of Saudi Arabia, while Gamal Abdel Nasser had been a strong opponent of the Saudi monarchs²²⁸.

²²⁵ Marfleet, P. *Egypt: Contested Revolution*, pp. 175-198.

²²⁶ Tripp, C. *The Power and the People*, pp. 139-162.

²²⁷ Jankowski, J. and Gershoni, I. *Rethinking nationalism in the Arab Middle East*, New York: Columbia UP, 1997, p. 153.

²²⁸ The geopolitical alliances of the Egyptian proto-movements will be discussed later when we will compare the workings of Popular Committees in other contexts after the 2011 uprisings.

As Beinín argues, this so-called Neo-Nasserism of al-Sisi was not apparent in the policymaking of the interim government either. “The acting Prime Minister Hazim Beblawi was a man of the centre and his government is not a leftist coalition”²²⁹.

This conclusion is also drawn by former presidential candidate, Hamdin Sabbahi in an interview for this book:

The interim government was not a leftist coalition but included some leftist politicians: like Kamal Abu Eita (a real unionist), former Minister of Labour; former Vice President, Hossam Eissa; the then Minister of Social Solidarity, Ahmed El Borai, and somehow the former Vice Premier, Ziad Bahaa El Din. The other members of the government were not from a leftist formation²³⁰.

In addition, according to Owen and Beinín, the Nasserists within the army and the inner workings of the states had been eliminated long before the 2013 military coup: “The true Nasserists were eliminated within the top posts of command inside the military personnel, years ago. In the political arena, the army has always fought against both Nasserists and Islamists, which explained why Marshal Hussein Tantawi needed a week to admit that Morsi won the elections against Ahmed Shafiq”²³¹.

The weakness of the Egyptian left-wing and socialist political groups has diverse causes²³². One of the most important was a lack of structured connections between the workers' movement in the countryside and leaders active in urban spaces. This is a key difference compared to the Tunisian case. After the 2011 uprisings, the highly centralised and well-structured Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) had great resources to weather the transitional period. However, if the political rhetoric of al-Sisi employed a left-wing tone to contain the forces of the 2011 uprisings with their demands for “Social Justice”, this tone could also undermine the appeal of the Muslim Brotherhood, with the exception of some very marginal cases, which has an ideology rooted in neo-liberal and conservative policies.

As the writer and Socialist Alliance activist, Sonallah Ibrahim, adds in an interview for this book, this process is also due to the organisational

²²⁹ Interview 14.

²³⁰ Interview 19.

²³¹ Interview 12.

²³² Beinín, J. Lecture at Stanford University, January 2015.

features of the left-wing groups. “The popular movements are not strong enough to promote change. And the Left does not work with the people”²³³.

In the long run, it might be argued, due the current crackdown, such effects might spill over and transform the demands of the Muslim Brotherhood and result in a political discourse with more noticeable elements of “Social Justice”. This possibility already surfaced during an interview carried out for this book with Moneim Abul Fotuh²³⁴, former Muslim Brotherhood politician and presidential candidate: “the Muslim Brothers are reformists, they are not revolutionaries. I left the Muslim Brotherhood in opposition to the Movements' leaders. I was against the formation of a political party. On this issue the debate within our political party (Strong Egypt) is still going on if we will keep active in politics or to be involved only as a think tank. The Muslim Brothers are capitalists, Strong Egypt is a centre-Left movement, we trust in the defence of workers and the poor. We stand against Islamic financial interests”.

3.2.4 The Crackdown on Left-wing Activists

As happened after the 1952 uprisings and as a consequence of the 2013 military coup, after the Islamists, it was the turn of left-wing groups to be repressed. As Bayat notes, the generation of youngsters who had gathered previously in Tahrir Square, at the time of writing, is disillusioned²³⁵. Many of left-wing political prisoners have been sent to prisons for breaking the anti-protest law or storming police stations²³⁶. Many have been on hunger strikes for months. Still these sentiments of disenchantment are not coterminous with a complete disengagement, even if repression is ongoing.

As el-Massry argues:

It is time for the leftists to be repressed. The regime' targets are the NGOs (whom many members are leftists). Old cases of leftist activists (e.g. Hes-

²³³ Interview 7.

²³⁴ Interview 15.

²³⁵ Bayat, A. *Revolution and Despair*.

Available at: <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/20688/revolution-and-despair> (28 January 2015). Last time accessed on 14 August 2015.

²³⁶ For instance, Mahiennur el-Massry is in prison at the moment of writing for storming a police station during the Morsi presidency (2012-2013).

sam Mohammedin of the Revolutionary Socialists) are referred to the State Security. They arrested leftist activists in Sharqeyya: after the Brotherhood, it is time to censor the Left. They began with the anti-NGO law and after they condemned demonstrators at the Presidential Palace (on July 2014, 23 people were arrested in Heliopolis including the activist Sanaa Saif)²³⁷.

The murder of the Socialist Alliance's activist, Shaimaa al-Sabbagh, by a police officer in Talaat Harb during the vigil of the fourth anniversary of the January 25 (2011) demonstrations in Tahrir Square showed clearly that the police had returned to their brutal practices to suppress dissent and the everyday struggles of the poor, in a more aggressive fashion than even during the Mubarak regime.

As one of the interviewee, al-Aswani states, "Shaimaa el-Sabbagh represented the Revolutionary Youth, composed in the majority by women. She was from the petty bourgeoisie of Alexandria, one of the most active cities during the Revolution. She was one of the poets of the Revolution. With her gesture to bring a rose to Tahrir she wanted to say that the revolution continues [...] On the other side, she found the brutality of the police. Why should have an armed general killed a disarmed woman like Shaimaa? He challenged her audacity"²³⁸.

This act of violence perpetrated by the police is the symbol of the repression of political oppositionists and workers' movements carried out by the Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's military regime.

Conclusion

As seen in Chapters 2 and 3, the originality of the 2011 uprisings in Egypt was to bring together at least three strands of protesters: marginalised citizens, anti-police activists and workers. As Abdelrahman summarised, "protest was no longer the domain of 'professional' activists, but one of 'ordinary' citizens who did not in fact see themselves as activists or attach a political label to their actions"²³⁹. These waves of protests were "spontaneous, dispersed forms of contentious actions"²⁴⁰ breaking out when "groups of

²³⁷ Interview 16.

²³⁸ Interview 17.

²³⁹ Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt's Long Revolution*, p. 71.

²⁴⁰ Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt's Long Revolution*, p. 64.

angry citizens”²⁴¹ reached a point where they could no longer accept daily humiliations.

However, despite several attempts of formal and informal cooperation between Islamist and Secular groups, the protests never evolved into a mass-based oppositional movement, nor an inclusive political coalition, or to put it as della Porta and Diani did, the proto-movement never became a social movement but downgraded its ideological or “revolutionary” potential, as many activists would define it, ending up in a social non-movement already at an early stage, when it was too soon to form new political parties and cross-ideological coalitions.

The “Islamic Awakening”, as the Iranian authorities defined the results of the 2011 uprisings, did not last for long. In Egypt the military personnel intervened in order to defend its corporate interests, restore stability, prevent concessions to the workers' movements, temporarily allowing an Islamist government with no effective powers, activating more radical political parties (such as the *Salafi*) in order to later discredit the Muslim Brotherhood and stigmatise them as terrorists. In other words, the exclusion of the secular forces who did not find any political overlapping between their demands for “Social Justice” and the conservative and neo-liberal policies of the Muslim Brotherhood, prevented the transformation of the proto-social movement into a revolutionary force. Between 2012 and 2014, this political exclusion enabled a certain degree of coordination among other political groups or individual protesters. After the 2013 military coup, both Islamists and other oppositional groups faced more severe repression, which demobilised all the potential social and political actors, merely leaving a very restricted space for dissident politics to some socialist parties, with the emergence of a Neo-Nasserism, which was followed by imprisonment for the recalcitrant veterans of 2011, and the co-optation of the more amenable into the military regime.

Finally, it has been discussed how, after 2011, the social demands of the proto-movement were demobilised through the employment of populism. This strategy was used by al-Sisi and the army to prevail over the popularity of Political Islam and neutralise the revolutionary potential of the left-wing organisations, the workers' movements and other oppositional groups.

²⁴¹*Ibid.*

However, as I will show in Chapters 4 and 5, where I tackle my two case studies, the activation and banning of the Popular Committees in Sayeda Zeinab and Independent Trade Unions in Mahalla al-Kubra, focusing on the cooperation between Secular and Islamist groups at the micro-level, the social conflict that broke out during the 2011 uprisings certainly has not been resolved.

CHAPTER FOUR

PATTERNS OF MOBILISATION AND DEMOBILISATION OF POPULAR COMMITTEES IN EGYPT (2011-2016)

There are many different narratives about the events related to the Egyptian 2011 uprisings and the 2013 military coup. A soldier, a policeman, a supporter of the dissolved National Democratic Party (NDP), one affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood and a left-wing activist would give very diverse, and often opposite, accounts of the major reasons for mobilisation and demobilisation during the demonstrations that took place in the urban settings between 2011 and 2016 in Egypt.

This is true even if we look at the grassroots level and we try to describe such micro-dynamics of the uprisings within the urban districts. In this chapter, I will focus on the workings and attempts at institutionalisation of Popular Committees²⁴² (*lijan sha'biyya* in Arabic) in the Cairo downtown district of Sayeda Zeinab in reference to one of the focus groups carried out in this neighbourhood during my sojourns in the Egyptian capital city during the uprisings and between 2011 and 2016. As seen in the Introduction, in this chapter I will answer to the questions: to what extent did the encounter in urban and peripheral neighbourhoods between non-organised groups and more defined political movements affected the proto-movement? How did the Popular Committees and their operations evolve when the popular unrest ended? In doing so, I will explain in which circumstances and to what extent the Muslim Brotherhood supporters monopolised the space for dissent, as I argued in the Introduction.

²⁴² The Popular Committees were already present in the Egyptian urban neighbourhoods during the first Intifada: the so-called Egyptian Popular Committee in Solidarity with the Intifada (2001). However, their impressive presence in the “Egyptian Street” in 2011 represented a new phenomenon for this country.

According to the Egyptian Life for Development Foundation²⁴³, thousands of Popular Committees were active in Cairo during the 18 days of occupation of Tahrir Square. As mentioned earlier, I decided to focus on the central district of Sayeda Zeinab for its socially mixed composition, high levels of mobilisation, high turn-outs at the first elections and highly partitioned and diverse urban fabric, located very close to the main governmental buildings, in order to analyze the evolution of the Popular Committees in an urban milieu throughout the mobilisation and demobilisation process.

In this chapter I argue that the Popular Committees in Egypt challenged the traditional patterns of state control over civil society. In other words, the 2011-2013 mass riots were paramount in the formation of new means of popular mobilisation, triggered by the participation in alternative networks which included local committees that aimed at enhancing a diverse range of unmet needs and motivating ordinary citizens to participate in the electoral process, providing social services, security and self-defence.

4.1 Popular Committees as Social Movements

It is still problematic to include the Popular Committees within the initial social movement that took place in the “Egyptian Street”. However, as seen in Chapters 2 and 3, the Popular Committees fit quite well with della Porta’s and Diani’s definition of social movements as a “network of informal relations between individuals”. Moreover, their evolution into civil society activism or their further dissolution might be better understood as a transformation of the initial mobilisation into social non-movements, as seen in more general terms in the previous chapter.

In other words, in a chaotic and potentially revolutionary context, when the state cannot provide some of its ordinary services, especially security, there will be ordinary citizens who will find an alternative way to support their own “communities through mutual aid and informal leadership”²⁴⁴.

²⁴³ El-Meehy, A. 'Egypt's popular committees from moments of madness to NGO dilemmas', *Middle East Research and Information Project* 42, No. 265, Winter 2012, website edition, Last time accessed Winter 2016.

²⁴⁴ Hassan, H. 'Extraordinary politics of ordinary people: Explaining the microdynamics of popular committees in revolutionary Cairo', *International Sociology* 2015, Vol. 30 (4), pp. 383–400.

Although the Popular Committees were very diverse in nature²⁴⁵, they generally worked primarily against the arbitrary methods of the police and as service providers (delivering gas tanks for cooking and heating, supplying food at low prices, planning sewage systems, and bringing electricity to residents)²⁴⁶.

Secondly, in a more stabilised environment, the participants within the Popular Committees aspired to have some influence on the local public officials in order to push them to be more accountable in their daily duties and to fight against the effects of crony-capitalism on youth and adults excluded from the labour market. Thus, they appeared to be willing to form more structured organisations such as NGOs or Private Voluntary Organisations²⁴⁷.

In a later stage, when the state apparatuses went back to their usual functions of service providers, the Popular Committees were generally perceived as a challenge to the state institutions and were eventually dismantled and legally banned.

Thus, if at the very beginning of the social proto-movement the Popular Committees were described by the public media as the “true spirit of the revolution”²⁴⁸, they were later stigmatised as one of the triggers of chaos in the local neighbourhood and then prohibited. This pattern followed the same evolution of other actors of the proto-movements later stigmatised by the state media as “dangerous youngsters”, as seen in Chapters 2 and 3.

On the other hand, it might be argued that the Popular Committees could be considered as potentially “paramilitary organisations”. In other words, as they necessarily do not challenge the state institutions, especially in their initial stage of existence, Popular Committees seemed to be mobilised, in a context of absence of police and military control over the urban space, as a mere substitute for collapsing state institutions.

They later evolved into “paramilitary groups” only when the first demonstrations developed into violent clashes with the regimes. This might be especially the case of organised and armed militias common in

²⁴⁵ Abu-Lughod, L. 'Living the 'revolution' in an Egyptian village: Moral action in a national space', *American Ethnologist* 39 (1), (2012), pp. 21–25.

²⁴⁶ Hassan, H. Extraordinary politics of ordinary people, p. 384.

²⁴⁷ El-Meehy, 'Egypt's popular committees'.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 384.

other MENA countries (e.g. Syria and Libya). However, in the Egyptian case, Popular Committees never took this shape of structured and paramilitary groups as happened in other countries in the Middle East where the proto-movements evolved within civil wars, as we shall discuss in Chapter 6.

On January 25 2011, Egyptians went down into the streets to protect their relatives and property from “looters and suspicious outsiders”. In a few days the police almost completely disappeared from the local neighbourhood while the army’s tanks went to the streets only three days later. Spontaneously, thousands of people, divided into small groups of 10 to 12 participants, sealed off major intersections on each street and set up checkpoints within their neighbourhoods or surrounding their own building. “Every block and neighbourhood in Cairo was run and operated by its residents”²⁴⁹.

At this point, a first definition of Popular Committees in Egypt might be provided. As Hatem Hassan argues, Popular Committees are “self-defence groups heterogeneous in their tactics, organisation, and efficacy, but a critical response to the security vacuum”²⁵⁰.

In more general terms, James Gelvin defined Popular Committees as “grassroots movements built on horizontal ties”²⁵¹. In this regard, it is crucial to refer to the analysis provided by Gelvin on the reasons that triggered the formation of Popular Committees in other historical contexts in the region. Analysing the evolution of mass protests in Syria (1918-1920), Gelvin envisages²⁵² the emergence of the masses as new national actors defined by the horizontal ties of a modern political opposition. When an increased number of citizens began to contest a growing number of public issues or simply to ask for more participation²⁵³, this renewal of civil society can trigger the emergence of a complementary mobilisation.

²⁴⁹ Bremer, JA 'Leadership and collective action in Egypt's popular committees: Emergence of authentic civic activism in the absence of the state', *The International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law* (2012), 13(4).

²⁵⁰ Hassan, H. Extraordinary politics of ordinary people, pp. 383-386.

²⁵¹ Kayali, H. Review of Gelvin, J. *Divided Loyalties*, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 31 No. 1 (Summer, 2000), p. 150.

²⁵² Gelvin, J. *Divided Loyalties. Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the close of Empire* Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998.

²⁵³ Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties*, p. 51.

In this regard, Gelvin²⁵⁴ uses the concept of “populist political sociability” in reference to a kind of mobilisation in which “the organisation of relationships of power among the non-elites follows horizontal, associational and national lines”²⁵⁵.

According to him, in 20th century Syria, the Popular Committees “institutionalised and broadened horizontal and associational ties”²⁵⁶. To a certain extent, they defined a new framework for social and political legitimacy. They “filled the void that neither the government” nor the “national organisations were structurally or ideologically capable of filling”²⁵⁷. This happened because the Popular Committees were involved in many modern and alternative procedures, partially alien to the state apparatus. “The committees commanded popular support because they integrated a variety of pre-existing, informal networks”²⁵⁸, profiting from the integration among familial, occupational and market bonds.

This is true for the Egyptian case as well, as I will show in the following sections, in a focus group carried out with seven participants in a Popular Committee of Sayeda Zeinab between 2011 and 2015. The aim is to understand the levels of political participation of these people, analysing their electoral choices at the ballot box, the way in which they perceived insecurity and the need for stability, the reasons that triggered their mobilisation and demobilisation, and the attempts to institutionalise the often precarious structures of the Popular Committees.

Still only a few scholars have focused their research on the development of Popular Committees during and in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings in Egypt. In doing so, I shall try to add a new understanding of the development of Popular Committees in local neighbourhoods, in reference to the literature on the participation in civil society in the Middle East, considering them, on the one hand, as a long-term phenomenon, not

²⁵⁴ Gelvin, J. 'The Social Origins of Popular Nationalism in Syria: Evidence of a New Framework', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 26/4(1994), p. 646.

²⁵⁵ The adjective “populist” concerns the effort of the Syrian non-elites group to be re-united around common interests in a context of rapid social and economic transformation.

²⁵⁶ Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties*, p. 53.

²⁵⁷ Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties*, p. 53.

²⁵⁸ Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties*, p. 113.

limited to the 18 days of occupation of Tahrir Square²⁵⁹, as Hassan argued, and very diverse as to the political behaviours of their participants, as other scholars who have separated those committees run by secular activists from those organised by the Islamists²⁶⁰.

I involved in this specific focus group seven Egyptian unmarried young men (20-34 years old) with different political and economic backgrounds coming from middle and upper-middle class families. They were all living close to Berqet Fil, a small alley parallel to Port Said Street in the popular neighbourhood of Sayeda Zeinab.

Mustafa, 23 years old, was a student living with his brother and grandmother when we began the fieldwork research; at the moment of writing, he is an employee in an air-conditioning company and an estate agent. Khaled, 25 years old, was unemployed in 2011, he later joined the army, as a conscript in Suez, and came back to Cairo at the end of 2013. He is now working in a shop belonging to his family. Midu, 28 years old, is working in a clothes shop in Sayeda Zeinab. Ahmed, 25 years old, was a student of law when I began this research; he later joined as a human rights lawyer at the Centre for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR), run by the former candidate to the 2012 presidential elections, Khaled Ali. Anas, 27 years old, was a student at the Cairo University living between his father's house in Sayeda Zeinab and his mother's house in Giza because his parents were divorced. At the moment of writing he is working for a left-wing NGO (Hisham Mubarak Human Rights Centre) and he has married. Moataz, 34 years old, is working as a carpenter in Berqet Fil alley. Finally, Mustafa, 33 years old, was a supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood, working in a shop belonging to his family in the Shubra neighbourhood; he previously spent long periods in Italy and worked as a translator.

The focus group was conducted in long, distinct sessions at cafes or other informal settings in Port Said Street (Sayeda Zeinab). Table XI shows the composition of the first focus group with seven participants in a Popular Committee in the Cairo neighbourhood of Sayeda Zeinab.

²⁵⁹ Hassan, H. 'Extraordinary politics of ordinary people', pp. 383-400.

²⁶⁰ El-Meehy, A. 'Egypt's popular committees'.

Table XI: Focus group 1: Sayeda Zeinab, Popular Committees

Focus group: seven participants	Young men (20-34 years old), middle and upper middle-class, participants in a Popular Committee in Sayeda Zeinab between 2011 to 2015, unemployed or newly involved in precarious jobs or NGO activities, unmarried.
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4.2 Popular Committees: Patterns of Mobilisation

In three days, between the first demonstration in Tahrir Square in Cairo on January 25 2011 and the “Friday of Anger” on January 28 2011, the police began to retreat or apparently disappear from the “Egyptian Street” while the rumors of many former detainees escaping from the prisons were spread by the public media.

In a few hours, Popular Committees were quickly organised. “Neighbourhood watch brigades, typically led by young men, sprang up to fill the security void as reports of criminal violence mounted”²⁶¹.

As confirmed by Hassan²⁶², participants in Popular Committees had three objectives: “scaring potential outsiders from entering their street, unifying responses to potential threats, and keeping residents alert”.

During our focus group we talked with the participants in one of the Berqet Fil’s Popular Committee in Sayeda Zeinab about the reasons why they initially mobilised. As Mustafa²⁶³ states, ordinary people were heavily involved in self-defence groups. “I spent my all day and night taking care of the safety of my neighbourhood”. Ahmed²⁶⁴ added that their mobilisation was a direct consequence of the absence of policemen. “With the honest people of my area we formed groups to substitute the absence of policemen after their disappearance”. According to Mustafa²⁶⁵, the police force disappeared from the street because it “was not trained to resist for

²⁶¹ El-Meehy, A. 'Egypt's popular committees'.

²⁶² Hassan, H. 'Extraordinary politics of ordinary people', p. 389.

²⁶³ Case 1, interviewee 1.

²⁶⁴ Case 1, interviewee 4.

²⁶⁵ Case 1, interviewee 7.

days of confrontations at the micro level with the people. It has been a structural failure, caused by the interruption of communications (often brought about by a lack of a battery in their walkie-talkies)".

According to Midu²⁶⁶, the mobilisation of the Popular Committees was a first reaction to the arbitrary methods of the police. "During my night shift, I often encountered former and violent policemen engaged in indiscriminate lootings". However, Anas²⁶⁷ added that his participation in the Popular Committees was necessary to protect his home from the spreading presence of criminals. "I took care of my area from the *baltagy*'s (thugs) attacks all through the night". Finally, Mustafa²⁶⁸ added that the Popular Committees were "spontaneous networks built-up on the perfect knowledge of each neighbourhood of the Muslim Brotherhood supporters and their capacity to identify any minimum risk".

As Bremer and Hassan²⁶⁹ have argued, residents tried to forge new relationships of trust: "first with residents in their apartment buildings, then with neighbours on their street, and eventually with individuals across entire neighbourhoods". This is true for this case study as well: all the participants in our focus group, when they took part in the formation of the Popular Committees, were living in the same building or in very close alleys.

It was often anxiety that motivated participants to secure major intersections of their streets and prevent looters and other outsiders from approaching their homes and cars. Individuals in a small alley, like Berqet Fil, were concerned with protecting homes, cars, building entrances, banks, stores and supermarkets. Popular Committees' participants, in larger streets such as Port Said Street, chose to stand on the main road's intersections²⁷⁰.

Berqet Fil is a relatively insulated quarter connecting Kadri Basha Street to Port Said Street. As many interviewees stated, the presence of a high number of small alleyways between each end of a side street "increased

²⁶⁶ Case 1, interviewee 3.

²⁶⁷ Case 1, interviewee 6.

²⁶⁸ Case 1, interviewee 7.

²⁶⁹ Bremer, JA. 'Leadership and collective action' and Hassan, H. Extraordinary politics of ordinary people, p. 388.

²⁷⁰ Hassan, H. 'Extraordinary politics of ordinary people', p. 388

the number of potential entrance points for looters”²⁷¹. Many of the alleyways at the intersections between the small alleys were controlled by participants of the Popular Committees. The same happened towards the intersections between the alleys and minor internal squares. All the interviewees confirmed that, at an initial stage, they were standing in front of their building or at the intersections with alleyways and internal squares.

“Our anxiety grew on January 28 2011 when the Sayeda Zeinab police station (200 metres from our homes) and the National Democratic Party’s buildings were burned”²⁷². According to Mustafa²⁷³, “the burning of the police station and NDP’s headquarters had been part of a more general plan to spread disorder, orchestrated by the regime, with the aim to create a controlled chaos and put in place their plans of political succession from Mubarak to another military officer”.

As confirmed by all the participants in the focus group, during an initial attempt to secure all the intersections between the main road and an internal square, surrounded by small stores and constantly occupied by dozens of cars, and the side small alleys in the area, they blockaded their street with metal barriers, abandoned or old cars and minibuses, wooden sticks, plastic objects and big stones. “The target was to prevent the entrance within the neighbourhood of any unidentified person”²⁷⁴.

In other words, the Popular Committees were becoming check-points. “We were asking anyone who was passing through our alley for an official Identity card; we were wearing colored armbands to be differentiated from other Committees in the same area; we were asking for documents from any taxi driver, car owner or to his passengers who intended to come to our alley from the main road or other intersections”²⁷⁵.

As Hassan explained, “residents used intersections not only to communicate with one another but also to prevent entry into a street [...] and test the limits of their own authority”. At that stage and during the two days when all mobile phone networks and the Internet were shut down by the regime, all the outsiders were treated as criminals by the Popular Committees’

²⁷¹ Case 1, Interviewees 1 to 7.

²⁷² Case 1, Interviewees 3, 4 and 5.

²⁷³ Case 1, Interviewee 7.

²⁷⁴ Case 1, Interviewee 4.

²⁷⁵ Case 1, Interviewee 6.

components. “When I was going to visit my relatives, the participants in other Popular Committees, not far from my neighbourhood, were very rude to me, asking many questions”²⁷⁶.

At this stage, they scheduled a rota with all the other participants within the Committees. “We established daily and night shifts according to the voluntary availability given by the individual participants in reference to their work activities or their will to take part in mass demonstrations”²⁷⁷.

This more structured organisation of the Popular Committees was paralleled by the decision of the elders within the Muslim Brotherhood to take part in the Tahrir Square mobilisations. “Many of the participants in the Popular Committees in my neighbourhood were supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and were already sharing reciprocal relationships of trust or were active in their Private Voluntary Organisations”²⁷⁸. Mustafa²⁷⁹ added that many Popular Committees of his neighbourhood were directly forged from the organisational structures of the local branches of the Muslim Brotherhood. “The Popular Committees have been put in place thanks to the organisational structure of the Muslim Brotherhood and their specific knowledge of the district. Their representatives within the charities were very useful in order to unify and manage the people taking part within the Committees”.

In this instance, el-Meehy confirmed²⁸⁰ that the Popular Committees have exhibited “important continuities with Islamist activism”, comprised mostly of “upwardly mobile, educated, middle-class professionals”.

4.2.1 Popular Committees: Sympathisers and Thugs

As for the composition of the urban Popular Committees, the interviewees agreed that they were spontaneous groups, with cross-class members, all volunteers²⁸¹, 95% male with a few women participating during the day

²⁷⁶ Case 1, Interviewee 5.

²⁷⁷ Case 1, Interviewees 3, 4 and 5.

²⁷⁸ Case 1, Interviewee 1.

²⁷⁹ Case 1, Interviewee 7.

²⁸⁰ El-Meehy, A. 'Egypt's popular committees'.

²⁸¹ According to the interviewees, some of the unemployed youngsters were receiving small amounts of money from upper-class and elderly neighbours for their daily engagement within the Committees.

shifts and with a significant presence of Copts and elders²⁸². And Khaled added²⁸³, “Some women, Christians, Syrian and Palestinian immigrants took part in the Popular Committees”.

Often women were not physically present in the streets, especially during the night shifts. However, they worked extensively as lookouts from their balconies, communicating news or rumours spread by the media, or spending hours on their terraces signaling the approach of any stranger or unexpected danger²⁸⁴. Moreover, they provided food to the members of the Popular Committees and in their homes they often took care of people, living in their buildings and alleys, injured during the clashes in the main roads²⁸⁵. Neighbour pharmacists often provided free medicines to the women of the neighbourhood and the local mosques.

Firstly, according to Anas²⁸⁶, the *sheikhs* from the mosques often motivated the people of the neighbourhood to take part in the Popular Committees²⁸⁷. In other words, the *muezzin* in the side streets mobilised through the mosque’s loudspeaker the ordinary people to take part in the local Committees. “Many mosques were set up as hospitals to help injured people. Some of the Martyrs of the Revolution were transferred to small mosques before joining the morgue in Sayeda Zeinab (Zeinum), once dead”²⁸⁸.

All the interviewees confirmed that, in the main roads, on the one hand, there were more episodes of looting and theft compared to their side street, on the other hand, the main mosques in Port Said Street were less active in mobilising the inhabitants or providing services compared to the small ones²⁸⁹.

Secondly, the doormen (*baaab*) were active at different levels in the Popular Committees. In normal circumstances, they usually work as

²⁸² El-Meehy, A. 'Egypt's popular committees'.

²⁸³ Case 1, Interviewee 2.

²⁸⁴ Case 1, Interviewees 3, 4 and 5. Hassan, H. 'Extraordinary politics of ordinary people', p. 392.

²⁸⁵ Case 1, Interviewees, 3 and 4.

²⁸⁶ Case 1, Interviewee 3.

²⁸⁷ This is very clear in the Ahmed Abdallah movie on the 2011 uprisings “Rags and Tatters” (2013).

²⁸⁸ Case 1, Interviewees 2 and 3.

²⁸⁹ Hassan, H. 'Extraordinary politics of ordinary people', p. 391.

people of trust for the building's landlord. Thus, they control who enter or leave the building. Moreover, they often ask every stranger approaching a building who he or she intends to visit. In other words, they control the "morality" of the tenants, for instance, they often intervene if an unmarried woman is visited by a number of different men. They check if every inhabitant of the building paid their bills on time. They often deliver food or help locate other facilities or amenities within the neighbourhood to the □□□□□ living in the building. Finally, they work as middle-men in order to bargain for the amount of rent to be paid by the new tenants or with estate agents to allow newcomers to visit a flat they would like to rent.

During the 2011 uprisings in Egypt, many doormen left their jobs to go back to their family homes in Upper Egypt. Those who did not leave their place of work were spending, as usual, their days at the main door of the building or in the entrance hall passing important news from the streets to the tenants of flats. According to Mustafa and Ahmed, on January 28 2011, the "*baaab* was encouraging the people living in our building to be ready to check the alley for any suspect coming from the main road"²⁹⁰.

Hassan argues that the importance of the doormen goes "beyond the security that they provide"²⁹¹. The *baaab* often had a good knowledge of the alleys where he was working, knew the people living in the neighbourhood and their activities. Some of them had strong connections with local politicians, both the National Democratic Party (NDP) and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Thirdly, the thugs (*baltagy*) were at the same time the enemies of the Popular Committees and part of their operation. The term is very vague and it has been used to justify different and conflicting narratives. During the 2011 uprisings, the term appeared to be related to legendary middle-men who were suddenly released from prisons, paid by the National Democratic Party (NDP) or motivated by the withdrawal of the police to spread insecurity. But according to Ismail²⁹², in the 1980s and 1990s, the term *baltagy* referred to all terrorists taking part in attacks against tourists. On the other hand, Amar considered the *baltagiyya* as "strongmen hired by the regime to physically and sexually harass political dissidents"²⁹³.

²⁹⁰ Case 1, Interviewees 1 and 4.

²⁹¹ Bremer, 'Leadership and Collective action', p. 23

²⁹² Ismail, S. *Political Life in Cairo's New Quarters*, Chapter 1.

²⁹³ Amar, P. in Hassan, H. 'Extraordinary politics of ordinary people', p. 393.

In parallel with the evolution of the different stages of the uprisings, the term *baltagy* acquired different meanings. For instance, after the 2013 military coup, according to the Muslim Brotherhood's narrative, the *baltagya* was "attacking their peaceful sit-ins"²⁹⁴. Likewise, according to the army, at that stage, the real thugs were only the Muslim Brotherhood supporters who formed part of a terrorist organisation. During the events of 2011, the same unfixed fear of these "thugs" was ever present. Thus according to my participants, Khaled and Midu, in Berqet Fil, the most notorious thugs were "Sarsa, Hanata and Tareq Matua". They felt that the *baltagys*²⁹⁵ were "affiliated in local networks of corruption ('mafias'), they were owners of small shops or trades, often hiring illiterate children or unemployed youngsters"²⁹⁶. Hassan's research²⁹⁷ and my own demonstrate how residents claimed to be able to identify these "thugs" from their "bad look", emphasising the presence of scars or wounds on their skin, or their use of colloquial Arabic, often used as a sign to identify then as "outsiders" intruding into the neighbourhood. It is also been argued that the "thugs" in the side roads "infiltrated" the Popular Committees. As Hassan states, they served as scouts for the *baltagya* present on the main roads and they wanted to determine how insecure a given neighbourhood was in order to carry out opportunist crimes²⁹⁸.

On the other hand the nebulous term "thug" could be an excuse for the unacceptable behavior of elements of the Popular Committees. Thus many ordinary citizens witnessed aggressive, violent or exaggerated reactions coming from the participants within the Popular Committees often attributed to the presence of armed individuals or *baltagya*²⁹⁹ within the Committees themselves.

Thus, with negative or positive connotations, *baobabs*, *sheikhs* and *baltagys* took part in urban Popular Committees of Sayeda Zeinab. In this area, the Committees had a majority of members from various social classes in which these social strata worked harmoniously together, guaranteed by preexisting networks of trust present among the supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood.

²⁹⁴ Case 1, Interview 7.

²⁹⁵ Gibril, S. in in Gerges, F. A., *Contentious Politics*, p. 312.

²⁹⁶ Case 1, Interviewees 2 and 3.

²⁹⁷ Hassan, H. 'Extraordinary politics of ordinary people', p. 394

²⁹⁸ Hassan, H. 'Extraordinary politics of ordinary people', p. 395.

²⁹⁹ Case 1, Interview 3.

It is not the aim of this chapter to analyze the differences in the composition of Popular Committees in rural and urban areas. However, it is relevant to consider that, according to el-Meehy, there were some important differences in the composition of Popular Committees in the peripheral neighbourhoods. She argued that the mobilisation of self-defence groups in the countryside has been a more “top-down process designed to maintain social peace”³⁰⁰. According to her, committees’ participants in the villages were often not volunteers, but men selected by major families for their social status: “rural committees excluded the poor, reinforced tribal hierarchies and, in many instances, welcomed members of Mubarak’s National Democratic Party”. However, a majority of Muslim Brotherhood supporters were the prevailing presence in the rural Popular Committees as well. As confirmed by our interviewees, this happened especially in the rural regions (e.g. Sharqeya, Gharbeya, etc.) where in a later stage the Muslim Brotherhood obtained impressive electoral victories.

4.3 Popular Committees: Patterns of Demobilisation

The demobilisation of the Popular Committees in the urban neighbourhoods began in parallel with the appearance of military officers in the public.

As explained in Chapter 3, the tanks of the army were already present in the main squares of Cairo on January 29 2011. By February 2, the army began to occupy the major intersections of the Sayeda Zeinab neighbourhood. “The people and the army are one hand” was one of the most heard slogans in Tahrir Square. Thus, with the army in the streets the role of the Committees began to change”³⁰¹.

In other words, the anxiety of the ordinary people was alleviated by the presence of the military in the streets of Cairo. This determined a perceived decline in lootings and the slow disappearance of the alleged criminals. “The *baltagiyya* decided to go back to their daily life as outlaws after hearing the approaching military tanks”³⁰².

³⁰⁰ El-Meehy, A. 'Egypt's popular committees'.

³⁰¹ Case 1, Interviewees 1 and 2.

³⁰² Case 1, Interviewees 3 and 4.

A second element contributed to change the structural organisation of the Popular Committees: the imposition of a curfew. “There were days when the curfew began in the early afternoon. The habits of many people began to change in these days”³⁰³. According to our interviewees, compared to the previous daily shifts, in the side streets “the shops and food sellers were closing by the early evening, taxi and minibuses were not working anymore after sunset, almost all the cafes were removing their outdoor chairs before 11 pm”.

For a few months, after witnessing people arrested merely because they did not carry special permits or their Identity cards, the areas between Abdin, Sayeda Zeinab and Westel Balad (downtown Cairo) were completely empty after midnight. “This did not prevent the internal movement of people within the alleyways (*haret*) and different neighbourhoods. However, only a few people tried to pass through the major intersections between main and side roads and only the youngsters tried to have a more extended mobility between different neighbourhoods”³⁰⁴.

Thus, by February 2, the participation in the Popular Committees was more routinised. According to Hassan, “individuals were not forced to remain on patrol at their Popular Committees”. Doing so, participants defined a “common set of practices, such as monitoring checkpoints, establishing barricades, detaining suspects, and sharing information”³⁰⁵.

In other words, the Popular Committees evolved into collectives with overlapping interests and non-contending ideologies despite the very diverse kind of participants, due to their political, age, gender, class and social backgrounds. “We were often celebrating and joining demonstrations. At that stage, we spent time watching football matches following less strict time shifts”³⁰⁶.

With the Mubarak’s resignation on February 11 2011, the main duty of the Popular Committees’ participants to fill the security vacuum had been mostly achieved. “I remember that there was an unprecedented enthusiasm: everything was possible at that moment and the army was on

³⁰³ Case 1, Interviewees 1 and 5.

³⁰⁴ Case 1, Interviewees 2 and 3.

³⁰⁵ Hassan, H. 'Extraordinary politics of ordinary people', p. 396.

³⁰⁶ Case 1, Interviewees 6 and 7.

our side. The soldiers patrolling our neighbourhood told us to go back home”³⁰⁷.

However, at that stage, the Popular Committees did not suddenly disappear but they did change their main features. Even with the lifting of the curfew, a less routinised presence of the people of the neighbourhood was still evident in the main intersections within the Sayeda Zeinab district. At that stage, the Popular Committees’ participants were no longer checking with the same accuracy the movements of people in the streets.

However, those who did take part in Sayeda Zeinab’s Popular Committees were ready to be active again in their own neighbourhood during the major episodes of mass mobilisation, which accompanied the spread of new waves of unrest: the Fridays of Anger, during the attacks on the State Security (*Amn el-Dawla*) on April 9, 2011 and the *Baloon Theater* clashes on June 30, 2011.

According to el-Meehy, in some districts the Committees continued to gather in spring and summer of 2011 to discuss the main problems of the neighbourhood: “cleaning streets, fixing water fountains improve living conditions in the area and painting buildings”³⁰⁸.

According to her study, in the neighbourhood of Basatin where she focused her research, the members of Popular Committee “gradually turned its attention to politics”, evolving towards “active citizenship”³⁰⁹. The Committee’s participants were especially involved in the electoral campaign for the constitutional amendments in the March 2011 referendum.

Thus, the participants in the Popular Committees, especially if young, students or unemployed, had been the first to be ready to take part during the continual waves of mobilisation and the electoral campaigns. In our specific focus group, the very first political struggle amongst the Committees’ members began with the Constitutional Referendum (March 2011). Our interviewees split over their political choices: five of them voted “Yes”, following the indication given by the Muslim Brotherhood and the army, the other two supported “No” (*Laa* campaign). The first group appeared to be motivated by more conscious revolutionary and secular intentions: “We wanted a new Constitution. For this reason, we

³⁰⁷ Case 1, Interviewees 1 and 2.

³⁰⁸ El-Meehy, A. 'Egypt's popular committees'.

³⁰⁹ El-Meehy, A. 'Egypt's popular committees'.

distributed flyers asking to the people to vote No”³¹⁰. The second group was motivated by a nationalist, populist and genuine sense of belonging: “We agreed with the decision of the Muslim Brotherhood to support the call of the army to not make major changes to the then existing Constitution”³¹¹.

It is possible to argue that at this stage, and after the end of the Mubarak’s rule, the social proto-movements, included the Popular Committees, began to evolve into social non-movements losing their initial revolutionary potential, as we have already argued in previous chapters.

4.3.1 Popular Committees and the Electoral Process

Thus towards the end of 2011 the reconfigured relationship between state and society influenced and reshaped the functions of the Popular Committees. To a certain extent, as el-Meehy argues, they began to work as NGOs in different social fields³¹², and less as local alternative sources of power and legitimacy.

Previously, we have seen how left-wing organisations were marginalised while the rallying call for “Social Justice” fell by the wayside. The same happened in the proto-movements, and the mass mobilisation as a whole, as the Islamists who took advantage of the space opened for political dissent after the 2011 uprisings, attempting to monopolise the local and street based movements. Thus, many members of the Popular Committees went back to old or new forms of social assistance, already existing within the welfare structure of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Although many Popular Committees “remained independent and active”³¹³ and held local meetings in April 2011 and, on the other hand, the Popular Committees tended not to develop “participatory decision making or to establish mechanisms for accountability to the communities”. Thus their staying power was limited as their organic linkage to communities faded and could not compete with the Muslim Brotherhood. In Sayeda Zeinab, the process of institutionalisation of the Popular Committees into these more structured and less accountable organisations seemed to be less routinised than elsewhere.

³¹⁰ Case 1, Interviewees 1, 2, 3, 6 and 7.

³¹¹ Case 1, Interviewees 4 and 5.

³¹² El-Meehy, A. 'Egypt's popular committees'.

³¹³ El-Meehy, A. 'Egypt's popular committees'.

The members of the Berqet Fil' Popular Committees extended their mobilisation out of the neighbourhood and thus seemed to be growing. On the other hand, many participants were returning to their daily life and shared some of the mainstream opinion, which by now stigmatised the remaining activists, who were pictured as a source of instability and therefore against Egyptian national interests. For instance, Ahmed, Midu and Khaled took part in their first demonstration only on the occasion of the Mohammed Mahmud Street clashes of November 2011. "This was the first time we went to Tahrir Square. We witnessed the violence of plain clothes policemen, infiltrated within the protests"³¹⁴. "At that stage, some of the people of my area went for the first time to Tahrir Square holding Egyptian flags, motivated by their nationalist sense of belonging"³¹⁵.

At this stage, many of the interviewees they were engaged in the more traditional pursuit of electoral campaigns and in party politics. The majority of the interviewees supported the Muslim Brotherhood at the ballot boxes during the November-January 2011-2012 parliamentary elections. The Al-Khadeweia High School in Port Said Street, a few metres away from Berqet Fil, witnessed an unprecedented turn-out and long queues outside. "I was interested in Freedom and Justice Party (FJP). Thus, I decided to vote for them at the parliamentary elections"³¹⁶. Ahmed argued that the Muslim Brotherhood supporters encouraged in different ways their constituency to participate in the electoral process. "The supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and *Salafi* groups, previously present within the Popular Committees, were distributing food, sugar, oil and clothes (*galabyyas*) at the schools' entrances to encourage their supporters to vote for them"³¹⁷.

However, in Sayeda Zeinab, a noticeable number of votes went to Hamdin Sabbahi, at that time perceived as a genuine "Neo-Nasserist" candidate. "I thought that *Tyar Shaabi* and *Kutla* (secular and left wing political groups) could have won many more seats in the new parliament"³¹⁸. In any case electoral politics took charge, and Popular Committees were losing their potential roles as mass organisations.

³¹⁴ Case 1, Interviewees 2, 3 and 4.

³¹⁵ Case 1, Interviewees 5 and 6.

³¹⁶ Case 1, Interviewee 7.

³¹⁷ Case 1, Interviewee 3.

³¹⁸ Case 1, Interviewee 4.

The final nail in the coffin was the cycles of violence as, the interviewee, Mustafa, recalled. “The political euphoria left behind the pre-existing patterns of mobilisation. Many Popular Committees completely disappeared after massacres and killings”³¹⁹.

On February 2 2012, the Port Said massacre occurred and this was recalled by interviewees as the opening shot, perpetrated by the “Deep State” against the presence of young people within the social proto-movements. As Khaled argued³²⁰, “this massacre was a political vendetta perpetrated by the police against the al-Ahly supporters but this was a warning to all of us, to all the revolutionaries and mobilised activists to not pursue our goals”.

The members of the Berqet Fil Popular Committees were once again confronted with an electoral choice on the occasion of the 2012 presidential elections. Mustafa, Khaled, Midu, Moataz and Mustafa decided to vote for Mohammed Morsi only to prevent the election of Ahmed Shafiq. “We were not happy with the Muslim Brotherhood but we did not want a *felul* (man of the old regime) to be the new president”³²¹. “Some of the members of our Committee during the days of the revolution encouraged people of my building to go to vote for the Brotherhood representative. Many of them did it for the relationships of trust built-up especially during the previous months of mobilisation”³²². On the other hand, Ahmed and Anas began their boycotts of the electoral process. “Leftist parties were not ready to prepare a campaign. I could never expect that a politician coming from the Muslim Brotherhood could have been chosen as the new Egyptian president”³²³.

4.4 The Institutionalisation of the Popular Committees

El-Meehy and Bremer³²⁴ have analyzed the transformation of Popular Committees into more formalised organisations. Originally the participants in the Popular Committees felt “empowered” by their daily engagement in these self-defence groups and as Hassan adds Popular Committees

³¹⁹ Case 1, Interviewee 7.

³²⁰ Case 1, Interviewee 2.

³²¹ Case 1, Interviewees 1, 2, 3, 6 and 7.

³²² Case 1, Interviewee 7.

³²³ Case 1, Interviewees 4 and 5.

³²⁴ El-Meehy, A. 'Egypt's popular committees' and Bremer, J. A. 'Leadership and collective action'.

“challenged previous definitions of collective behavior and social movements”³²⁵.

But the “Deep State” and the newly born military junta, perceived the Committees as a potentially dangerous, modern, political and experimental space for building-up a grassroots and participatory structures of power. For those reasons, they decided on a ban on their activities. One can argue that the limitations placed upon the Popular Committees’ activities was the first step in the political repression before the suppression of all the Islamists’ grassroots associations, which was later extended to all activities of Muslim Brotherhood’s activities. Many of the Popular Committees members were arrested and intimidated several times and faced military trials. As Mustafa, Ahmed and Anas confirmed, “We have been arrested and released at least three times in the last three years”³²⁶.

In order to limit the spread of these local sources of popular power, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) tried to issue licenses to both legalise and control their operations. Some of the participants in the Egyptian Popular Committees, especially those closely affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood, aligned to the procedural alliances between the Islamists and the army, that were forged during the initial bouts of elections, accepted the system of legalisation proposed by the army and the state. At the same time, SCAF also pursued an agreement of sort with the Popular Committees to compensate for the crackdown on workers’ strikes by seemingly allowing for greater leeway in other sectors of civil society.

Thus, “a coalition of Popular Committees signed a three-year protocol with the Ministry of Local Development by which local activists would be recruited to deliver butane cylinders to households. But the protocol also gave the committees a broader mandate to cooperate with the authorities in providing literacy classes, vocational and leadership skills training, encouraging religious tolerance, cleaning up squares and supporting the families of the imprisoned”³²⁷. According to el-Meehy, the Popular Committees were successfully engaged in more ambitious projects as well. “*Ard al-Lewa*’s Committee successfully self-financed a railway crossing to minimise accidents among residents. It also mobilised around the establishment of a park, school and a hospital on fourteen

³²⁵ Hassan, H. 'Extraordinary politics of ordinary people'.

³²⁶ Case 1, Interviewees 4, 7 and 5.

³²⁷ El-Meehy, A. 'Egypt's popular committees'.

feddans of vacant land owned by the Ministry of Religious Endowments (*Awqaf*) in the neighbourhood. Next door, the committee in Imbaba organised effective nonpayment campaigns for public services the state failed to provide, such as garbage collection, while Nahia's Committee constructed an on/off ramp to connect the neighbourhood to the ring road"³²⁸.

By doing so the Popular Committees were slowly becoming NGOs, tending to merge with the pre-existing networks of Muslim Brotherhood charities, schools and hospitals. As the interviewee Mustafa confirmed, "In Berqet Fil, many participants within the Popular Committees were involved in associations working with the elders or providing social services to the disabled"³²⁹. Other interviewees from the Popular Committees began working in centres and NGOs focused on the defence of human rights. "My participation in the grassroots movements has been vital for my present work position as a human rights defender"³³⁰.

However, compared to other areas, where the Popular Committees' boards were located in buildings affiliated with the Ministry of Insurance and Social Affairs, as el-Mehhy notes, the Popular Committees in Sayeda Zeinab were less structured and organised.

At this stage, these groups began to be more integrated in the vertical and far more well structured organisation of the Muslim Brotherhood, which mobilised its constituency to take part in the electoral campaigns and the political process of formation of the party, once Freedom and Justice (FJP) had been officially legalised for the first time in the Muslim Brotherhood's history. It might be added that the activation of those newcomers to political activism has been achieved despite the long periods of political demobilisation witnessed by many Islamist activists before the 2011 uprisings.

However, some of the interviewees were not so easily assimilated into the new arrangements during the transition and they expressed greater scepticism towards this state-driven attempt of institutionalisation. "Towards the end of 2012, I was not interested anymore in the activities of the Popular Committees. They entailed a political affiliation that I was not

³²⁸ *Ibid.*

³²⁹ Case 1, Interviewee 7.

³³⁰ Case 1, Interviewee 5.

willing to share”³³¹. At that stage, other groups began to be infiltrated by the military and secret services (*Mukabarat*) as we will see more clearly in the case study involving the Egyptian Independent Trade Unions (EFITU), introduced in the next chapter.

For this reason, many members of the Popular Committees were not necessarily involved in a process of empowerment or enhanced political capabilities but in the building-up of renewed networks of charities. Consequently, as el-Meehy stated, “the reinvention of the Popular Committees as NGOs has limited their effectiveness”³³².

It might be argued that in other urban neighbourhoods of Cairo and Alexandria a different kind of political competition was occurred. As a matter of fact, the legalisation process of the *Salafi* groups has been used by the regime to delegitimise and stigmatise the Muslim Brotherhood in the long-term.

Even if, at the micro level, there was not a clear distinction between Popular Committees run by the Muslim Brotherhood and *Ansar al-Sunna*, there have been urban areas where the majority of the Committees’ members were in the hands of *Salafi* supporters (e.g. Ayn Shamps), helped by millions of pounds coming from the Gulf States. “The members of the *Salafi* Popular Committees were less politically and scholarly trained. Moreover, their knowledge of their own areas was less rooted within the neighbourhood’s daily customs. The same can be said about the relations of trust between the people who were less stable compared to the Muslim Brotherhood pre-existing networks”³³³.

As el-Meehy notes, the *Salafi* groups were especially active with the poorer people in some of the urban neighbourhoods of Cairo, providing for instance “LPG cylinders”³³⁴. However, in the neighbourhoods the *Salafi* groups were not perceived competitors to the longstanding presence of the Muslim Brotherhood but as populist allies of the army. “Many of those people were considered by us as newcomers, we did not witness such a widespread presence of *Salafi* before January 29 2011”³³⁵.

³³¹ Case 1, Interviewee 3.

³³² El-Meehy, A. 'Egypt's popular committees'.

³³³ Case 1, Interviewee 7.

³³⁴ El-Meehy, A. 'Egypt's popular committees'.

³³⁵ Case 1, Interviewees 1 and 2.

The evolution of Popular Committees in these urban neighbourhoods in the aftermath of the events of early 2011 demonstrates how the army used the blurred distinction between state and civil society, to retrieve power and authority after the fall of Mubarak. Thus in the initial stage, nationalists and Islamists latched on to the wave of dissent as embodied in the Popular Committees to create forms of “political populist sociability” in the vacuum left by the fall of the old regime and thus preventing the political empowerment of the members of the Popular Committees and other proto-movements. Later on, the state reinforced its control over civil society through the usual methods of legalisation as coterminous with co-optation. Where this was not possible the process was carried out with more violent methods of repression, as we shall see in the next section.

4.5 Popular Committees and the Military Coup

Here I will discuss the evolution of the Popular Committees during the year in power (2012-2013) of Mohamed Morsi. In Sayeda Zeinab the local Committees in the initial incarnation as centre of potential participatory democracy were no longer visible in the neighbourhood. It is true that the Muslim Brotherhood did not have complete control over the state security apparatus. Thus, in various stages of the ensuing political confrontation, the Popular Committees of the Muslim Brotherhood were part mobilised to oversee the electoral procedures for the Constitutional referendum (December 2012), protect the Presidential Palace of Heliopolis during the clashes following the presidential decree (November 2012) and on the occasion of the attacks on the Muslim Brotherhood headquarters (Moqattam, Manyal and Mansour Street) between June 30 and July 9 2013. As Bassiouny and Alexander argue, “the Brotherhood turned increasingly to the activist base of the Islamist movement to act as ‘police’ – attacking demonstrators, and in some areas taking over functions of maintaining law and order. These moves [...] inspired fears of both the collapse of public security and the emergence of a state of Islamist militias”³³⁶.

The Popular Committees, led by a majority of Muslim Brotherhood supporters, guaranteed a system of checkpoints and security within the sit-ins of Rabaa al-Adewya and El-Nahda in Cairo. The same happened in the major Squares all over the country where the followers of the ousted President, Mohamed Morsi, were demonstrating to defend his legitimacy.

³³⁶ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread and Freedom, Social Justice*, p. 282.

“The alliance between the police and the army was instilling a sense of vendetta against the Islamists”³³⁷.

After the June 30 2013 demonstration in Tahrir Square, Popular Committees were formed again in urban localities. In Sayeda Zeinab, they were less structured and organised compared to previous years. “At that time, we partially mobilised again in parallel with a spreading sense of uncertainty and insecurity. However, we did not strictly follow daily and night shifts. We were less in number”³³⁸. “One was not sure what the reaction of the Muslim Brotherhood could have been to the 2013 military coup. However, we did not support the roadmap proposed by the military junta”³³⁹. At the same time, older fears resurfaced. “There were many groups of *baltagys* and thieves active again at that stage in downtown Cairo”³⁴⁰.

However, this renewed and precarious mobilisation did not last long. “The Popular Committees resisted shortly and everything went wrong”³⁴¹. If the Popular Committees continued to protect the urban spaces chosen by the Muslim Brotherhood for their peaceful resistance, a few days after the approval of the roadmap and the beginning of the mandate of the acting President, Adly Mansur, a law banning the Popular Committees was approved. “This decision has been the first step to later ban all demonstrations with an anti-protest law”³⁴².

According to our interviewees³⁴³, the law banning the Popular Committees was the first attempt by the authorities to identify the supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood so as to later arrest or control them after the approval of the anti-terrorist law. In other words, the ban on the Popular Committees has been vital to deactivate completely the mobilisation of the Islamists and, in more general terms, to put under strict control all the activities within Egyptian civil society, strengthened by the mobilisation in early 2011. “The martial law gave to the police the right to kill. It allowed to a certain extent the society as a whole to be engaged in arbitrary

³³⁷ Case 1, Interviewee 7.

³³⁸ Case 1, Interviewee 7.

³³⁹ Case 1, Interviewees 1 and 2.

³⁴⁰ Case 1, Interviewees 3 and 4.

³⁴¹ Case 1, Interviewee 7.

³⁴² Case 1, Interviewee 7.

³⁴³ Case 1, Interviewees 3 and 4.

actions”³⁴⁴. “It was a way to go back to the emergency law of the Mubarak and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces’ times”³⁴⁵. “The police can arbitrarily arrest, torture and violate human rights”³⁴⁶.

After the Rabaa’s massacre (14 August 2013) and the non-violent resistance of many supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, the participants in the Popular Committees of Berqet Fil involved in this book went back to their ordinary lives. They did not take any further part in the electoral processes or in demonstrations. “We boycotted the Constitutional Referendum (January 2014), presidential and parliamentary elections (May 2014, December 2015)”³⁴⁷. “The Muslim Brotherhood made many mistakes but I will never support Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and this military regime”³⁴⁸. “I never went to vote since 2012, in my area the schools during the electoral procedures have always been empty”³⁴⁹. “After the recent crackdown, there is a new political alliance among left-wing and Islamist activists”³⁵⁰.

The interviewees, at the moment of writing, share a sense of depression and disillusionment for the current conditions of political crackdown and human rights violations, perpetrated at the micro-level by the Egyptian police, as discussed in the previous chapter. However, they are ready to be active again whenever the arbitrary practices of the police officers in the urban neighbourhoods again become too unbearable³⁵¹.

Conclusion

In this chapter I described the workings and evolution of Popular Committees (or *lijan sha’biyya*) in the Cairo downtown district of Sayeda Zeinab in reference to a focus group carried out during the different stages of the local mobilisation between 2011 and 2015. It is very useful to disentangle the micro-dynamics of mobilisation and demobilisation in urban Cairo localities during the Egyptian 2011 uprisings and the 2013

³⁴⁴ Case 1, Interviewee 7.

³⁴⁵ Case 1, Interviewees 3 and 4.

³⁴⁶ Case 1, Interviewees 3 and 4.

³⁴⁷ Case 1, Interviewees 1 to 7.

³⁴⁸ Case 1, Interviewees 3 and 4.

³⁴⁹ Case 1, Interviewee 6.

³⁵⁰ Case 1, Interviewee 7.

³⁵¹ This happened on February 2016 in the Darb el-Ahmar district.

military coup in order to better understand how the “Deep State” has controlled and repressed the mass.

This chapter sought to present a new understanding of the development of the Popular Committees in local urban neighbourhoods, examining them over time but also noting the diverse politics of their participants. In the end, like other proto-movements, the Popular Committees evolved into social non-movements and were permanently demobilised.

The Popular Committees in Egypt challenged the traditional patterns of state control over civil society. They were a modern, self-organised and experimental system of grassroots participation, in the long term integrated within the Muslim Brotherhood charities and NGOs, gradually losing their initial potential of political empowerment, revealed in their attempt to fostering cross-class and ideologically mixed coalitions.

The Popular Committees were self-defence groups, a spontaneous response to the absence of police. They gradually evolved into checkpoints and service providers in an initial attempt to secure all the intersections between the main roads and internal alleyways, using informal methods of resistance and networks of trust. Women, doormen, sheikhs and thugs were involved within the Popular Committees at different levels and with distinct functions. The petty criminals were often ready, on the one hand, to provide jobs in the black market to the disadvantaged youth involved in the Committees, on the other hand, they were infiltrated these self-defence groups, and thus generated a sense of insecurity, which undermined the reason why the Popular Committees were established in the first place.

With the arrival of the army’s tanks, a demobilisation process of the Popular Committees began. In Sayeda Zeinab, the Popular Committees were less organised and routinised than elsewhere. However, in many cases, the Popular Committees began to work as a constituency to forge new political parties, as Committees to prepare electoral campaigns, or as NGOs active in different fields.

However, their evolution into more participatory and legalised structures was prevented by the military junta. The army and the Abdel Fattah al-Sisi presidency after the 2013 military coup banned the Popular Committees, perceived as a potentially dangerous space for building-up grassroots mobilisations. This was the initial step in a more general process of repression which later swept up the Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood,

as well as the left-wing activists, leading to the stigmatisation all of them as terrorists.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE EGYPTIAN FEDERATION OF INDEPENDENT TRADE UNIONS (EFITU) IN A PERIPHERAL INDUSTRIAL AREA

As I have discussed previously, up to 2011 the politics of the Middle East can be characterised as a set of state-society relations in which, at most, ineffective dissent has been allowed so long as it did not threaten the status quo³⁵². However, in this chapter, I draw upon other approaches (Hanieh)³⁵³, previously mentioned in Chapter 3, arguing that the “notion of class” is a key to understanding the dynamics followed by Egyptian contemporary contentious politics. This brings about a new understanding of the nature of the state, the relationship between “markets and political democracy, and the assessments of social struggles”³⁵⁴. This is especially true if we look at the dynamics behind the Egyptian 2011 uprisings and their aftermath with regards to the relevance of strikes and workers' movements.

In other words, in this chapter, I argue that, in 2011, Egypt was on the eve of a working-class based social movement, thanks to a long-lasting instances of class struggle and trade union mobilisation, but these fragmented workers' movements lacked political organisation, a coherent leadership and a cohesive ideology that had as their first aim the inclusion of the sub-proletariat and the countryside into the urban proto-movement. As I argued in the Introduction and Chapter 3, I will further disentangle how left-wing and workers' proto-movements have been marginalised in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings in Egypt. In doing so I will answer to the questions: to what extent did the encounter in urban and peripheral neighbourhoods between non-organised groups and more defined political movements affected the workers' proto-movement? How did the

³⁵² Mitchell, T. 'Everyday Metaphors of Power', pp. 545-577.

³⁵³ Hanieh, A. *Lineages of Revolt, Issues of Contemporary Capitalism*.

³⁵⁴ Hanieh, A. *Lineages of Revolt*, p. 6.

Independent Trade Unions work and their operations evolve when the popular unrest ended?

Thus, first, I will analyze the evolution of the workers' movements in Egypt and the attempts of trade unionism to overcome the control of the state in the fight for better workers' rights. I will later discuss the participation of the independent trade unions throughout the 2011 uprisings in the Nile Delta town of Mahalla al-Kubra.

If we previously tackled the attempts at the institutionalisation of the mass mobilisation in urban neighbourhoods in reference to the evolution of the Popular Committees, we will focus our attention now on the evolution of the workers' proto-movement in a peripheral area. The Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) [in Arabic *Al-Ittihad al-Masri li-l-Naqabat al-Mustaqila*] had been among the most organised and structured oppositional forces to mobilise during the 18 days of occupation of Tahrir Square and afterwards. However, the trade unions within EFITU appeared very fragmented and lacked an independent leadership, thus they were easily used as a tool of cooptation of political figures belonging to the old regime by any newcomers or they were manipulated by the military junta and finally advanced as supporters of the 2013 military coup.

As discussed in the Introduction, I will focus my research of the industrial town of Mahalla al-Kubra in the Nile Delta with one of the biggest textile factories in Egypt. For the historical presence of industries and factories, the high number of workers' protests, levels of labour mobilisation, and number of independent trade unions, Mahalla al-Kubra is one of the most interesting peripheral areas to be studied in Egypt, which serves as good case study in order to shed light on the evolution of the trade unions throughout the revolutionary process.

The concentration of factories in Mahalla al-Kubra is related to the industrial policy of the late 1970s to shift new industries to satellite cities "isolated from old industrial centres and from each other"³⁵⁵. According to Abdelrahman, "the whole city is in one way or another connected to the industrial complex"³⁵⁶.

³⁵⁵ Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt's Long Revolution*, p. 58.

³⁵⁶ Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt's Long Revolution*, p. 57.

This is true even if we look at the grassroots level and we try to describe such micro-dynamics of the uprisings within this countryside. Thus, in this chapter, I will describe the workings and attempts of institutionalisation of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU), especially in reference to the peripheral area of Mahalla al-Kubra, drawing upon the results of one of the focus groups carried out in this neighbourhood during my stays in Egypt between 2011 and 2015.

My aim is to understand the levels of political participation of these workers, analysing their electoral choices at the ballot boxes, the reasons that triggered their mobilisation and demobilisation, and the attempts to institutionalise the often precarious structure of the local independent trade unions.

Very few studies have focused research on the development of the independent trade unions at the micro level during and in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings in Egypt. In doing so, I shall try to add a new understanding of the development of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) in peripheral neighbourhoods, and in reference to the literature on workers' movements in the Middle East.

Nine workers were part of this focus group. They were all living in Mahalla al-Kubra and its outskirts. The trade unionists and activists, Hamdi Hussein and Gamal Hassanin, acted as the gatekeepers interviewed in order to select the workers involved in this focus group. Hamdi Hussein has spent his life taking part in mass mobilisations and strikes. He has been in prison several times in the previous decades. The last time was in 1988 when he marched in Shon Square (downtown Mahalla al-Kubra) with a few pictures depicting former President Hosni Mubarak in a coffin.

In a preliminary stage, Hamdi and Gamal were part of the process for the composition and organisation of this specific focus group. The aim was to choose farmers and workers in order to analyze the workings of the local independent trade unions before and after the 2011 uprisings in Mahalla al-Kubra, compared to more established trade unions representing labour rights (ETUF), the levels of mobilisation and demobilisation within the social proto-movement, the cooperation with other oppositional groups, the political participation after the 2013 military coup, their accounts of the 2011 uprisings and its aftermath, the relations with soldiers and policemen, established political parties and the Muslim Brotherhood, and finally, the strategies of these organisations. At the end of each meeting we

had a debriefing session with the gatekeepers involved in order to talk about the group dynamics and the results of the interviews.

The participant workers and farmers were: Wedad, 32 years old, a worker at Gazal al-Mahalla; Garib Moussa, 30, a former worker at Gazl el-Mahalla textile factory; Mahmoud, 40, a farmer and *tuk tuk* driver in Qafr el-Aghazia, close to Mahalla; Mahrour, 45 years old, a farmer and honey producer; Emad, a farmer and voluntary trade unionist; Walid, 50 years old, a worker at Gazl al-Mahalla; Eman, 23 years old, a worker and rank and file activist.

Table XII: Focus group 2: Mahalla al-Kubra, EFITU

Focus group: nine participants	Two stakeholders: Hamdi Hussein, leader of the local Socialist party and Gamal Hassanin, local trade unionist. Seven workers and farmers: Wedad, Walid, Eman, Gamal, Garib, Emad and Mahmud.
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From the very beginning, I found a promising level of interest among the participant workers and farmers. However, a number of problematic issues had to be tackled at a later stage. We met workers and farmers in their workplace in Mahalla al-Kubra and Qafr al-Aghazia in three different sessions from January 2013 to December 2015. Initially access to workers and farmers was through the mediation of the activists and trade unionists who convinced them to participate in the research, especially before the 2013 military takeover, but afterwards the interviewees were involved in the focus group without the presence of the aforementioned trade unionists.

At the beginning, the interviewees did not express any security concerns in reference to their participation in the focus group. However, after the 2014 presidential elections, the workers involved appeared to be more concerned about freedom of speech and the general state of repression in their daily activities, thus some of the workers and the farmers asked to be mentioned in the research only with their first names in order to be less noticeable. However, the interviewees never expressed any personal or specific concern or fears or mistrust.

5.1 Workers' Movements and the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF)

This section will explore the institutionalisation of the workers' movements in Egypt and the state's control over such a potentially strong oppositional force. The Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) was created during Gamal Abdel Nasser's presidency in order to put workers and former Communist activists under the control of the state³⁵⁷. This formal arrangement continued during the Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak presidencies: unofficially the workers' movement presented a major challenge to the legitimacy of the regime from the 1970s to 2011. Historically, the major social movements in Egypt (1919, after the Second World War, 1977 and 1985) were informed by the spread of strikes and workers' mobilisations. The protests in the late 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and 2000s paralleled economic liberalisation and "open door" policies. The public sector workers protested against the government cuts to the annual budget (1975) that culminated in a three-day occupation of the Ghazl al-Mahalla textile factory in March 1975³⁵⁸.

However, in order to be eligible for the International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans, the Egyptian government accepted to cut subsidies on consumers "up to 50 per cent" in the spring of 1976 and decided to privatise 314 public enterprises. In January 1977, mass riots took place in the major Egyptian urban districts with the participations of independent trade unionists, ex-Communists and unaffiliated workers.

According to Beinin, between 1986 and 1993, there was an average annually of 33 strikes in Egypt³⁵⁹. At the same time the balance between state and private enterprises changed. According to Tripp, by 2005 75% of the Egyptian economy was privately owned³⁶⁰. As Hanieh argues, Egypt had recorded the "largest number of firms privatised out of any country in the region"³⁶¹.

³⁵⁷ Beinin, J. *Workers and Thieves, Labor Movements and Popular Uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2016, p. 6 and p. 27.

³⁵⁸ Beinin, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 31.

³⁵⁹ Beinin, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 44.

³⁶⁰ Tripp, C. *The People and the Power*, p. 156.

³⁶¹ Hanieh, A. *Lineages of Revolt*, p. 50.

Again the biggest strikes took place in September 1988 at the Ghazal al-Mahalla factory. They were triggered by the end of the annual grant to public sector workers to buy clothes and supplies for their children³⁶².

At the end of the mobilisation of 1988, the labour protests began to be strictly monitored by the regime. As a matter of fact, as state capitalism and liberalisation did not take into account workers' rights, many leftwing intellectuals and activists grew alienated from the Communist and socialist pro-regime political parties (e.g. *Tagammu*) and preferred to be engaged in NGOs activities. Many of those NGOs advocated labour rights. For instance the Center for Trade Union and Workers Services (CTUWS), founded in 1990, was among the first promoters of workers' mobilisations in the 1990s and 2000s.

Most notably, the professional syndicates began to be perceived by the Egyptian authorities as an area of dissent and for this reason, the pro-regime hierarchies of these organisations were used to control dissent within them³⁶³. Thus with Law 100 (1993), the government could better interfere in the trade unions' activities while simultaneously the Muslim Brotherhood extended its control over the boards of the Lawyers and Engineers Syndicates³⁶⁴. It is not the aim of this book to disentangle the role of the professional unions but it is important to consider to what extent they have been used by the authorities as a means to co-opt the Muslim Brotherhood supporters within the state institutions.

With the appointment of a businessman as Prime Minister, Ahmed Nazif, in 2004, and a large number of new liberalisations, strikes and collective actions also increased significantly. According to Beinin, from 1998 to 2003, there was an average of 118 workers' protests per annum, and long-term strikes and factory occupations, more than doubled in 2004 (265)³⁶⁵. At that stage, despite the increasing number of labour mobilisations, the security apparatus rarely used violence to disperse the protests. Thus, as Tripp explained, in the 2000s it was evident that there was "a new spirit of industrial activism, new ways of organizing labour protests and an agenda that challenged the political leadership of the state and the regime's instruments of control"³⁶⁶.

³⁶² Beinin, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 45.

³⁶³ Tripp, C. *The People and the Power*, p. 152.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁵ Beinin, J. *Workers and Thieves*, pp. 65-66.

³⁶⁶ Tripp, C. *The People and the Power*, p. 157.

In 2006 and 2007, the largest industrial strikes took place in Ghazal al-Mahalla textile factory. According to Beinin, this was a turning point for the intensification of workers' mobilisations: "Viewing the 2006 strike at Ghazal al-Mahalla as a beginning tends to promote the view that the intelligentsia's discovery of the workers' movement established its significance"³⁶⁷.

Thus, he continues:

The symbolic importance of Ghazal al-Mahalla, the concentration of one fifth of all the public sector textile workers there, their long history of struggle, and oppositional political forces' acknowledgment of the significance of the strikes marked a qualitative intensification of workers' collective action and its significance³⁶⁸.

The state reacted quickly. The security forces directly intervened in the ETUF elections for local union committees replacing popular leaders with pro-regime figures. However, a number of workers' leaders were elected in a type of counter-committee at Ghazal al-Mahalla³⁶⁹.

After the December 2006 strike in Mahalla, the strike committee launched a campaign to impeach the ETUF committee. Three thousand workers resigned from the official textile trade unions within the ETUF, while regime representatives went to Mahalla to negotiate with the unofficial committee about the demands for bonuses coming from the workers³⁷⁰. Workers' organisations outside the framework of the ETUF were also initiated³⁷¹.

As Tripp notes, "the old techniques of social control were breaking down"³⁷², and, as Alexander added, the engine that drove strikes in Mahalla al-Kubra became "a model of democratic organizing in which delegates and negotiators were accountable to mass meetings of the strikers, and leadership was predicated on the self-activity of the rank and file"³⁷³.

³⁶⁷ Beinin, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 75.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁹ Beinin, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 76.

³⁷⁰ Beinin, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 78

³⁷¹ Tripp, C. *The People and the Power*, p. 158.

³⁷² Tripp, C. *The People and the Power*, p. 157.

³⁷³ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 158.

In 2008, the Ghazal al-Mahalla strike committee proposed a national labour strike on April 6 (giving the name to the April 6 Youth Movement) to demand an increase in the minimum wage. The concerns of the mobilised workers appeared to move beyond the workplace to include “ambitious demands concerning the political order”³⁷⁴ with some coordination with opposition parties. However, in more general terms, the demand was to establish an independent trade union of the local textile workers. Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif went to Mahalla to discuss this with the workers' representatives. Their demands for better transportation, special bakeries, subsidised foods and medical equipment were achieved.

However, only tax collectors had the official recognition of the Independent General Union of Real Estate Tax Authority Workers (RETAU) granted. By December 2008, with an unprecedented decision, around 30, 000 of 50, 000 tax assessors left the ETUF to join the RETAU³⁷⁵.

5.2 From the ETUF to the EFITU

This section will further analyze the attempts of the Egyptian independent trade unionism to overcome governmental control in the years preceding the 2011 mobilisations and the flow of activities from 2011 to the al-Sisi regime. In the 2000s the Egyptian workers were increasingly mobilised. As Tripp noted, “they were unwilling to acquiesce in their deteriorating position. Instead they were determined to resist many aspects of the economic reform policies, the neoliberal justifications on which they rested and the intertwined interests of private capital and state authority that promoted them”³⁷⁶.

In other words, as discussed in the Introduction and Chapter 3, to participate in protests and strikes in Egypt, in the 2000s, became acceptable. Between 2009 and 2010, hundreds of workers and farmers gathered in front of the People's Assembly to fight for their social rights. According to Beinín, this established the right “to occupy public space” which led to the decision later to occupy Tahrir Square³⁷⁷.

³⁷⁴ Tripp, C. *The People and the Power*, p. 159

³⁷⁵ Beinín, J. *The People and the Power*, pp. 81-82.

³⁷⁶ Tripp, C. *The People and the Power*, p. 163.

³⁷⁷ Beinín, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 99

However, at the national level, the ETUF did not have the same approach of the UGTT in Tunisia. In other words, the traditional trade unions, controlled by the Mubarak regime, during the 2011 uprisings, did not call for labour protests even if the proto-movement was clearly ready for a mass mobilisation. The spontaneous workers' committees had no "institutional mechanism to compel the ETUF to join the popular movement against Mubarak"³⁷⁸. In other words, the local committees were not duplicated at the national level.

The CTUWS coordinator, Kamal Abbas, and the RETAU president, Kamal Abu Eita, along with smaller unions of teachers, health professionals and retiree associations formed on January 30 2011 the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU), taking advantage of the permanent occupation of Tahrir Square. However, the pro-regime ETUF continued to support the state institutions while in April 2011 its president, Hussein Megawer, was arrested for his affiliation to the then dissolved National Democratic Party (NDP).

The Tahrir Square demonstrations encouraged the workers' groups to mobilise and communicate³⁷⁹. A demand for *cleansing (tathir)* of public institutions of the remnants of the old regime was raised during the nationwide teachers' strike involving half a million workers³⁸⁰.

In February 2011, there were 489 strikes in Egypt. The EFITU issued a statement proclaiming "Demands of the Workers in the Revolution": the right to form non-governmental unions, the right to strike and the dissolution of the pro-regime and corrupt ETUF. The SCAF appointed Ahmed el-Borai, professor of labour law at Cairo University, as the interim Minister of Manpower.

On the one hand, the labour mobilisations were constantly increasing in parallel with some trade unionists' attempts to have better represented workers' rights within the interim government. On the other hand, the military junta intervened in order to put under state control all kind of protests. Thus, while El-Borai obtained the legalisation of the EFITU, a law criminalising strikes, demonstrations and sit-ins was also approved³⁸¹.

³⁷⁸ Beinín, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 107.

³⁷⁹ Tripp, C. *The People and the Power*, p.160.

³⁸⁰ Hanieh, A. *Lineages of Revolt*, p. 169.

³⁸¹ Tripp, C. *The People and the Power*, p. 161.

The law on independent unions has been one of the most important achievements for the Egyptian workers. According to the new Trade Union Freedom Law (August 2011), 50 workers in a workplace can form a union without any governmental supervision³⁸². Moreover the EFITU statements ahead of a massive strike in Mahalla al-Kubra indicated “a degree of organisation and defiance of the law that was likely to overwhelm the existing resources of the government”³⁸³. Finally, Kamal Abu Eita was elected as the EFITU first president. Likewise, in April 2013, a second federation of independent unions was established: the Egyptian Democratic Labour Council (EDLC) convened with 149 unions represented³⁸⁴.

However, the post-revolutionary 2012 Parliament was not representative of the Egyptian workers. As Alexander argues, “the parliamentary arena proved to be almost impenetrable by workers themselves, or even by political organisations articulating workers' social and political demands”³⁸⁵. Moreover, the seats available for the Egyptian workers, according to the electoral law, have been largely controlled by the ETUF³⁸⁶.

After the election of Mohammed Morsi to the presidency (June 2012), the Muslim Brotherhood's leader issued a decree allowing all the members of the Islamist movement to be part of the ETUF board. During the Morsi presidency, former NDP politicians were co-opted within the boards of the official trade unions showing an effort of the Muslim Brotherhood to “share control of the ETUF with former Mubarak supporters”³⁸⁷. In more general terms, the Muslim Brotherhood tried to strengthen the ETUF in order to counterweight the independent unions³⁸⁸.

As Beinín shows, in 2012, 1,969 strikes took place in Egypt, and as many as 1,972 in the first six months of 2013³⁸⁹. The Muslim Brotherhood warned that strikes and civil disobedience would lead to “the collapse of

³⁸² Beinín, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 112.

³⁸³ Tripp, C. *The People and the Power*, p. 162.

³⁸⁴ <http://www.madamasmr.com/sections/politics/whatever-happened-egypts-independent-unions>. Last time accessed on 10 May 2016.

³⁸⁵ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 253.

³⁸⁶ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 256.

³⁸⁷ Beinín, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 117 and Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, pp. 258-259.

³⁸⁸ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 268.

³⁸⁹ Beinín, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 117.

the state”³⁹⁰. The workers' mobilisations were part of the opposition to Morsi's liberalisation policies and to the lack of workers' rights in the 2012 Constitution. This pushed the CTUWS, the EFITU, the ECESR and other think tanks and independent trade unions to take part in the *Tamarrod* campaign asking for Morsi's resignation.

After the 2013 military coup, the labour protests decreased and Kamal Abu Eita accepted an appointment as Minister of Manpower in the interim government, paving the way to what we defined in Chapter 3 as a pseudo Neo-Nasserism which had the aim to co-opt leftwing activists within formal politics without the recognition of the workers' demands.

In 2014, the strikes continued in Mahalla al-Kubra forcing the interim Prime Minister Hazem Beblawi to resign. After the 2013 military coup, on the one hand, although the EFITU continued to express concerns for workers' rights³⁹¹, on the other hand, it supported the security apparatus and the crackdown on Islamists.

5.3 Workers and Farmers: Patterns of Mobilisation in Mahalla al-Kubra

In this section I will zoom in on the patterns of workers mobilisation and demobilisation in Mahalla al-Kubra during and after the 2011 uprisings. Due to the historical presence of industries, the high and constant number of workers' mobilisations and labour unionism, Mahalla al-Kubra is an interesting case study to elaborate on the evolution of the independent trade unions during the 2011 uprisings and beyond.

The January 25 2011 uprisings in Mahalla al-Kubra were centred in the street protests in Shon Square at the intersection between the main road, where minibuses coming from Cairo usually stop, and the small and unpaved crowded alleys nearby.

The workers involved in our second focus group confirmed their early participation in the 2011 local protests even if the number of participants was not comparable to the Tahrir Square mass riots. Many of them had already been involved in previous anti-regime mobilisations and strikes. The participants who were unionised workers demanded better labour

³⁹⁰ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 262.

³⁹¹ CTUWS report and Beinin, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 121.

conditions and new investments in the textile industries. “We were among the hundreds of young people of the revolution gathering in Shon Square in Mahalla al-Kubra”³⁹². “We were asking for a better life and human working conditions”³⁹³. “We participated during the first protests after an already long-lasting struggle to overcome the rooted crisis of the Egyptian cotton industry”³⁹⁴. But this interviewee had some previous experience: “We have been used for years to go to downtown Cairo during mass demonstrations and strikes or close to the Mubarak’ residency in Qasr al-Qobba to demonstrate against his neo-liberal labour’ policies”³⁹⁵.

As seen in Chapter 3, after Mubarak resigned, between February and March 2011 the workers’ proto-movement “entered the workplaces on a mass scale”³⁹⁶. As confirmed by the participants in our focus group, if during previous mobilisations the demand of the Mahalla’ workers was about an improvement in labour rights and a minimum wage, at this stage, the major demand of the workers was the removal of the factory management associated with the Mubarak regime³⁹⁷.

After the approval of the law on the legalisation of the EFITU, from April to September 2011, there was a rapid expansion of labour organisations and a spread of independent unions in Mahalla al-Kubra. The focus group participants considered at this stage that the improvement of workers’ rights should have been the major outcome of the upheaval. However, they recalled that even during the first waves of protests there were doubts whether or not the military junta would have allowed more secure workers’ rights or, in any case, these new openings were only a façade. “The most important achievement of the 2011 revolution seemed to be that we might have better defended workers’ rights”³⁹⁸. “The military junta has been working to sabotage the law on Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) since its approval by the Minister of Manpower, Ahmed el-Borai”³⁹⁹.

The strikes of September 2011 brought about a change in the workers’ demands. Rather than occurring as isolated strikes in fragmented

³⁹² Case 2, Interviewees 3, 4 and 9.

³⁹³ Case 2, Interviewee 5.

³⁹⁴ Case 2, Interviewees 1, 2 and 6.

³⁹⁵ Case 2, Interviewees 3 and 7.

³⁹⁶ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 209.

³⁹⁷ Case 2, Interviewees 1, 2 and 8.

³⁹⁸ Case 2, Interviewees 1, 4 and 5.

³⁹⁹ Case 2, Interviewees 2 and 9.

workplaces, the larger strikes were supported by 500,000 workers nationwide⁴⁰⁰. “We entered in a new strike in September 2011 asking for better works' conditions and a change in the factory' management”⁴⁰¹, recalls one focus group participant.

In this period, the Egyptian authorities appeared to be willing to open new negotiations with Mahalla's unionised workers pressurised by their high levels of mobilisation. According to the trade unionist, Hamdi Hussein, the September 2011 strikes in Mahalla al-Kubra forced the government to talk to the workers. “Misr Spinning threatened to strike in September and forced the government to open up a new round of negotiations”⁴⁰². This ended with an agreement approved by the government to improve pay and labour conditions across the textile sector⁴⁰³.

5.4 EFITU in Mahalla al-Kubra and the Elections

Despite initial attempts to take some advantage from the newly approved legislation on independent unionism, during the six elections between 2011 and 2015, the wishes of Mahalla al-Kubra workers to institutionalise their proto-movement faded, as I will discuss further on.

After the 2011 mobilisations, the strike committee of the Gazhal al-Mahalla textile factory tried to take some advantage of the el-Borai's law on the independent unions and the parallel short-termed political openings, with an attempt to legalise at least seven⁴⁰⁴ unofficial unions with the support of the already unionised workers in the local manufacturing industries.

However, the rushed electoral procedures did not give the local workers enough time to organise a consistent structure within the factories. The Nile Delta electoral district, including Mahalla al-Kubra, participated in the national vote during the third round of the parliamentary elections in January 2012. The presence of soldiers and the military police was overwhelmingly evident in the town.

As for the political transition, for the local workers, initially it seemed wise to take part in the 2011-2012 parliamentary elections although many

⁴⁰⁰ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 213

⁴⁰¹ Case 2, Interviewee 3.

⁴⁰² Case 2, Interviewee 1.

⁴⁰³ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, p. 210.

⁴⁰⁴ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread and Freedom*, p. 212.

other mobilised workers in Cairo, Suez and Alexandria were already feeling marginalised within the political arena and decided to boycott the elections from that stage onwards. However, the Muslim Brotherhood supporters in Mahalla al-Kubra failed to mobilise their local constituency, thus they were poorly represented in the new Parliament, winning four of the 10 available seats. “I decided to go to vote and support independent workers or some candidates of the local party al-Adl (Justice)”⁴⁰⁵. Another interviewee added: “The left-wing Revolution Continues Coalition was almost absent in Mahalla. For this reason, I voted for independent candidates supporting workers' rights, like Hosman Zeina”⁴⁰⁶.

Once they realised that the new Parliament was lacking a genuine representation of the workers among its MPs, the local trade unions had the idea to forge a “People's Parliament” in order to list the workers' demands to the renewed People's Assembly⁴⁰⁷. The same happened at the end of 2010 when the political opposition formed an alternative Parliament to the Assembly controlled by Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP).

In this same year, the workers' grievances did not decrease with the political empowerment of the Muslim Brotherhood. Thus, the atmosphere in Mahalla al-Kubra noticeably changed in parallel with the June 2012 presidential elections. The local workers involved in this research, with some exceptions, considered Hamdin Sabbahi as a valid candidate representing workers' rights due to his political career as a trade unionist. For the same reasons, Sabbahi obtained the support both of Kamal Abu Eita, the leader of the EFITU, and Tarek Mostafa Kaeb, treasurer of the Tax Collectors' Union (RETAU)⁴⁰⁸. Along with the former member of the Muslim Brotherhood, Moneim Abul Fotuh, Sabbahi appeared to be the only alternative to the old regime candidate, Ahmed Shafiq, and the Muslim Brotherhood leader, Mohammed Morsi. “I voted for Sabbahi. However, he did not genuinely represent workers' rights in his political programme”⁴⁰⁹.

At this stage, it was already evident that the grassroots movements and the mobilised workers had not acquired any benefits from the 2011 uprisings.

⁴⁰⁵ Case 2, Interviewee 1.

⁴⁰⁶ Case 2, Interviewee 2.

⁴⁰⁷ Case 2, Interviewees 1 and 2.

⁴⁰⁸ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread, Freedom*, pp. 265-266.

⁴⁰⁹ Case 2, Interviewees 3 and 4.

However, these grievances were soon transferred to the opposition to the neo-liberal policies of the Muslim Brotherhood, widely associated with the previous regime of Mubarak. Thus, many workers and farmers preferred to vote for Ahmed Shafiq at the 2012 presidential elections. “We did not witness any benefit from the revolutionary movement. Thus I voted for Ahmed Shafiq”⁴¹⁰. “The Muslim Brotherhood politicians belong to the old regime too”⁴¹¹.

Ahmed Shafiq won in three of the electoral districts of Mahalla al-Kubra being the leading vote winner at the presidential elections in the town’s hinterland. On the other hand, Hamdin Sabbahi won in the two urban districts of Mahalla al-Kubra, as a potential representative of the local workers. Thus, the Muslim Brotherhood completely failed to mobilise their supporters among the voters in this industrial area, despite one of the moderate Islamists, Saad al-Husseini, being chosen as Mahalla’s representative in the People’s Assembly in the 2005 parliamentary elections⁴¹².

5.5 Workers, Farmers and the 2012 Constitution

On the occasion of the 2012 Constitutional Referendum, the Mahalla al-Kubra workers and farmers were already very critical of the political approach of the Muslim Brotherhood. The “no” to the new Constitution here won with 52%. In more general terms, all the policies implemented at the national level by the Islamists appeared to be ineffective in supporting workers’ rights. “The political ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood is a major reason of concern for us”⁴¹³. “Some Islamists came to our homes promising a 100 EP (£10) raise and sugar to push us to go to vote yes”⁴¹⁴. “To some of my neighbours the local supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood rented a *tuk tuk* in order to push them to express their vote in support of the Islamists”⁴¹⁵.

According to the farmers interviewed in this study, at that very moment, the major matter of concern for them was the law on the cancellation of the debts for the farmers, exceeding 10,000 EP (£1,000). They complained

⁴¹⁰ Case 2, Interviewee 5.

⁴¹¹ Case 2, Interviewee 6.

⁴¹² Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread and Freedom*, p. 270.

⁴¹³ Case 2, Interviewees 3 and 4.

⁴¹⁴ Case 2, Interviewees 5 and 6.

⁴¹⁵ Case 2, Interviewee 7.

that the cut was not implemented by the local banks. Thus, they considered the political decisions of the Muslim Brotherhood as ineffective at the local level. "When I went to the bank, they said that I should have carried a special permit which I was not aware about in order to cut my debt"⁴¹⁶. "The Muslim Brotherhood was cheating us"⁴¹⁷. In this instance, the local supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, such as Khaled Derwish, argued that the decision of the central government was not implemented by remnants of the old regime at the local level with the aim to sabotage Morsi's presidency.

Weeks before the December 2012 Constitutional Referendum there were protests and strikes in Mahalla al-Kubra again. On the occasion of major clashes, 318 people were injured while they were heading to Shon Square to ask for the cancellation of the farmers' debts. "The clashes erupted with the Muslim Brotherhood supporters and the police did not intervene"⁴¹⁸.

However, the criticisms of the Muslim Brotherhood were related especially to their policies on the prices of food and vegetables. "The Muslim Brotherhood government decided that the value of a ton of sugar was 2,000 EP (£200) but its real value is 1,500 EP. Often the local farmers did not find local buyers for their goods thus they were forced to sell it to other traders"⁴¹⁹. "There was no freedom or 'Social Justice'. The prices were increasing too fast"⁴²⁰.

In the 2012 Constitution, at the end of a controversial political debate, and approved by the Constituent Assembly controlled by a majority of Muslim Brotherhood politicians, the quota for workers' seats was removed, "along with the state's commitment to a wide range of social and economic rights"⁴²¹.

This was perceived by the workers and farmers involved as detrimental to their specific social interests. On the specific articles of the 2012 Constitution concerning workers' rights, the criticisms coming from the interviewees, who were unionised workers, ranged from the levels of their salaries to the right to strike. "The 2012 Constitution was against workers'

⁴¹⁶ Case 2, Interviewees 5 and 6.

⁴¹⁷ Case 2, Interviewee 7.

⁴¹⁸ Case 2, Interviewee 1.

⁴¹⁹ Case 2, Interviewees 6 and 7.

⁴²⁰ Case 2, Interviewee 8.

⁴²¹ Alexander, A. and Bassiouny, M. *Bread and Freedom*, p. 253.

rights”⁴²². “There were no rights for farmers and workers. A woman cannot accept that the salary is related to the level of productivity”⁴²³. “This new Constitution gives to the factory owners the right to fire their employees”⁴²⁴. “We do not know when a strike is legal and when it is not”⁴²⁵. “They did not hear the workers' demands”⁴²⁶.

The same complaints were referred by interviewees in our second focus group centring on trade unions, minimum salary, economic rights and industrial productivity. “The Constitution was detrimental for the Egyptian trade unions. The government has the control over the workers”⁴²⁷. “It is wrong to link salaries to the levels of productivity: our infrastructures are obsolete and this decreases the levels of productivity”⁴²⁸. “The salary of the public sector' workers do not rise in reference to inflation and this impoverishes them”⁴²⁹. “They want to bring about a new class struggle within the factories: the extra levels of production are not paid”⁴³⁰.

In the week preceding the 2012 Constitutional Referendum, in Shon Square, a symbolic election had been organised by the local trade unionists and Left-wing activists. As Gamal and Hamdi confirmed⁴³¹, long meetings and discussions took place in downtown Mahalla al-Kubra on the eve of the Referendum. “There was a great participation in our counter-Referendum”⁴³². “No won with 96%. There was a big participation especially of women who often encouraged other women to take part in the symbolic vote”⁴³³.

According to the participants who were trade unionists, at the moment of conducting this focus group, the 2012 Constitution encouraged inequalities among the citizens and had the potential to trigger new protests. “The Constitution created inequalities among the citizens and the first to be

⁴²² Case 2, Interviewee 2.

⁴²³ Case 2, Interviewees 5, 6 and 7.

⁴²⁴ Case 2, Interviewee 3.

⁴²⁵ Case 2, Interviewee 4.

⁴²⁶ Case 2, Interviewees 3 and 4.

⁴²⁷ Case 2, Interviewees 1 and 2.

⁴²⁸ Case 2, Interviewees 1 and 2.

⁴²⁹ Case 2, Interviewee 3.

⁴³⁰ Case 2, Interviewee 4.

⁴³¹ Case 2, Interviewees 1 and 2.

⁴³² Case 2, Interviewee 3.

⁴³³ Case 2, Interviewees 1 and 2.

affected were Nubians, women, workers, Christians and children”⁴³⁴. “The 2012 Constitution could have brought back demonstrations in the streets”⁴³⁵. “The Muslim Brotherhood is a conservative movement and their politicians are truly capitalists”⁴³⁶.

5.6 Workers' Movements and the Military Coup: Patterns of Demobilisation

With the Morsi presidency, a growing opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood's economic policies arose in the Nile Delta. As already discussed, hundreds of strikes and new workers' mobilisations were taking place daily in the first months of 2013. This new wave of strikes and workers' protests was hijacked by the military leading up to the 2013 military coup through the *Tamarrod* campaign. According to our interviewees, at this time the meetings of the EFITU, the CTUWS and other opposition groups began to be infiltrated by the military and civilian secret services.

Even after the coup, however, quiet was not restored: the workers went back on strike in January 2014 bringing about the resignation of the interim Prime Minister, Hazem Beblawy. The demands of the workers included the revision and the approval of the law on a minimum wage.

This national strike involved the Suez Steel factories, the Munoufeya and Mahalla al-Kubra textile factories, the woolen mill sector, the workers in Gharbeya, together with Bticino's workers in the Cairo satellite district 10th Ramadan and Pirelli in Alexandria. Thus, in parallel with the economic crisis, 1,050 industries were closed in the previous three years, including the paper factory Simo and the sugar industry Nesha. Many other workers were gradually joining the protests including the Cleopatra cement factories, public transport' and post office workers, together with hundreds of tourism employees at public resorts.

On the eve of the 2014 presidential elections, the ETUF supported Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. However, despite the call of the EFITU and the EDLC to boycott the elections, the former Manpower Ministry, Kamal Abu Eita, gave his support to the only other candidate, Hamdin Sabbahi. This has

⁴³⁴ Case 2, Interviewee 9.

⁴³⁵ Case 2, Interviewees 1 and 2.

⁴³⁶ Case 2, Interviewees 3, 4 and 5.

been considered as a new sign of the controversial support given by some of the former leaders of the independent trade unions to al-Sisi's agenda. In other words, before and after the military takeover, the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) appeared to be fragmented, easily demobilised, with some of their leaders both at the national and local levels supportive of the military coup.

As a matter of fact, the interim government and al-Sisi's presidency maintained their form of state capitalism, including negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the elimination of the tax on the higher income (more than 22.5%). On April 28 2015, with a provocative decision against the mobilised workers, the Cairo Administrative Court labeled the strikes as illegal and sacked many workers, charging them with being involved in illegal protests. The governmental Egyptian Federation of Trade Unions (ETUF) approved this decision. In a statement, the ETUF stigmatised the "politicisation of the trade unions" in reference to the spread of the new independent trade unions⁴³⁷. Moreover, the security personnel became to act increasingly aggressively against workers' mobilisations. For example, they fired on a workers' sit-in close to the cement factories in al-Arish on February 2 2015. A worker died and three were injured.

Thus, the participant workers in our second focus group appeared very critical of al-Sisi's economic policies. Moreover, they had wanted accountability by the police and the military personnel of those who attacked workers' strikes and appeared to be ready for new mobilisations in relation to economic demands. "The al-Sisi political economy is the most neo-liberal ever witnessed in Egypt"⁴³⁸. "The target of the new president is to include in the military regime, the former NDP politicians and businessmen"⁴³⁹. "The military personnel who attacked the workers must be charged for their crimes"⁴⁴⁰. "The aims of the army are to show that the revolution is over and the workers' demands are against the national interests"⁴⁴¹. "New conflicts have been opened up in the

⁴³⁷ De Lellis, F. and Del Panta, G., Egitto, anniversario con scioperi, *Il Manifesto* <http://ilmanifesto.info/egitto-anniversario-con-scioperi/>, Last time accessed on 10 May 2016.

⁴³⁸ Case 2, Interviewees 1 and 2.

⁴³⁹ Case 2, Interviewee 1.

⁴⁴⁰ Case 2, Interviewee 3 and 4.

⁴⁴¹ Case 2, Interviewees 3, 4 and 5.

countryside between farmers and businessmen for the land and water rights”⁴⁴².

The Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU), especially at the national level, has been clearly weakened by the 2013 military coup for several reasons. “They did not have enough time to evolve into a more structured organisation”⁴⁴³. “The laws for the formation of independent trade unions are too blurred. Thus, we did not know if our demands of legalisation would have been approved by the government”⁴⁴⁴. “We lacked financial resources to create new independent unions”⁴⁴⁵. “Many workers are worried about possible economic consequences if they decide to leave the ETUF in order to join the EFITU”⁴⁴⁶.

At the local level, the EFITU continued to organise new strikes, which have been limited in time and space, and without any reference to a comprehensive or national strategy. According to the *Mahrousa Center*, the number of workers' protests nationwide in 2015 were 393, this showing a constant high level of labour mobilisation. Moreover, according to the Egyptian NGO Democracy Meter, there were 1,117 reported labour protests in 2015, and an additional 493 protests from January to April 2016, showing a constant high level of labour mobilisation⁴⁴⁷. However, as discussed in Chapter 3, repression has been extended from the Islamists to the Left-wing activists and the trade unions. Especially the professional unions, traditionally controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood, have been purged of their Islamists board members, as all their other grassroots activities. “After the military coup, they not only attacked the Islamists but the local independent trade unions as well”⁴⁴⁸.

With full victory at the 2015 parliamentary elections, and a very low turnout, al-Sisi implemented his agenda and consolidated his power. But despite the spread of repression against NGOs and opposition groups, on

⁴⁴² Case 2, Interviewees 5 and 6.

⁴⁴³ Case 2, Interviewees 1 and 2.

⁴⁴⁴ Case 2, Interviewees 3 and 4.

⁴⁴⁵ Case 2, Interviewees 3 and 4.

⁴⁴⁶ Case 2, Interviewee 7.

⁴⁴⁷ Acconcia, G. 'The Shrinking Independence of Egypt's Labor Unions', Carnegie Endowment of Middle East Peace, *Sada*, Available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/64634>. Last time accessed on 20 September 2016.

⁴⁴⁸ Case 2, Interviewees 5 and 6.

December 11 2015, the biggest meeting of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) took place in Cairo in the office of the Centre for Workers Services and Trade Unions (CTUWS).

The meeting was organised after the ETUF issued a document where it stated its aim to oppose and marginalise the EFITU⁴⁴⁹. At least 50 trade unions participated at the meeting, including the Mahalla al-Kubra's textile workers, al-Arish cement factories' workers and several representatives of the Nile Delta's farmers. This meeting was especially important because the EDLC and the EFITU had not organised a general assembly since 2013. Thus, every local independent union began to act independently from the national federation.

Some of our interviewees took part in the Cairo meeting and considered it as crucial for further mobilisations. "The December 11 2015 meeting was especially important because it has been the first attempt to coordinate again the works of the local fragmented and isolated unions"⁴⁵⁰. "We decided to forge a committee representing workers' rights and launch a national campaign for supporting trade union freedoms"⁴⁵¹. "At the CTUWS, we discussed organising a number of regional conferences, taking part in the January 25 2016 anniversary celebrations of the revolution and ending our mobilisation with a unified protest"⁴⁵².

One of the controversial issues for the workers involved in our focus group is Law 18 2015, which targets public sector workers. Between December 2015 and August 2016 a number of new strikes in textile, cement and building factories began. According to the workers who were interviewed those strikes were not structured or well organised. "The workers mobilised again for better salaries"⁴⁵³. "In many of those strikes, the EFITU was not involved"⁴⁵⁴. "The fear among workers, farmers and all other opposition groups is unprecedented. It is very hard to organise and

⁴⁴⁹Regeni, G. In Egypt, 'Second life for Independent Trade Unions', *Il Manifesto* <http://ilmanifesto.global/in-egypt-second-life-for-independent-trade-unions/> Last time accessed on 10 May 2016.

⁴⁵⁰ Case 2, Interviewees 1 and 2.

⁴⁵¹ Case 2, Interviewees 3 and 4.

⁴⁵² Case 2, Interviewees 6 and 7.

⁴⁵³ Case 2, Interviewees 8 and 9.

⁴⁵⁴ Case 2, Interviewees 1 and 2.

take part in any kind of demonstration within the framework of al-Sisi's military regime"⁴⁵⁵.

In more general terms, al-Sisi's regime strengthened the repression against all the organisations of the Egyptian civil society. Many NGOs have been searched and closed on the grounds of receiving foreign funding. A number of foreign NGOs, active for years in Egypt, have been closed since 2011, including Freedom House and the Centre for International Journalists (CIJ). As for the EFITU, a lawsuit filed by the ETUF on the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings asking for the prohibition of the independent unions (including other small groups defending labour rights), labelled as "illegal" and "illegitimate," has been referred to the Supreme Constitutional Court in June 2016 and is expected to be discussed in the coming months.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I used a class-based approach as a key to understanding the 2011 uprisings and their aftermath in Egypt. Although this approach has been often neglected by many mainstream analysts, one cannot avoid the noticeable number of strikes and workers' mobilisations, which occurred in the country between 2011 and 2016.

However, there is also another current of scholars who have considered the grassroots' mobilisations of the workers both at the urban and peripheral levels as being intertwined with other political grievances and the most significant form of protests during the Egyptian 2011 proto-movement, and thus well rooted in a long-lasting tradition of struggles against the Mubarak regime, and as of significant concern for the military junta and the al-Sisi presidency.

As seen in the previous chapter, which focused on Popular Committees in an urban Cairo district, grassroots' protests were easily demobilised or channeled in more general, less political and organised civil society activities in many neighbourhoods in parallel or after the 2011 mass riots. The same happened with the legalisation of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU). This appeared to tackle the demands for workers' rights that were more independent from the government economic policies and control, at least compared to the past. On the other

⁴⁵⁵ Case 2, Interviewees 3 and 5.

hand, the EFITU has been used both to control the mobilised workers by the state security agencies and to manipulate and divide the workers' grievances and their leadership, partially co-opting them into the interim government.

In doing so, the military regime included some of the left-wing oppositionists, excluding and demobilising the working class. This technique did not succeed completely. If the Muslim Brotherhood and their civil apparatus have been easily de-motivated with the introduction of death penalties, the imposition of life imprisonment and the freezing of assets, nevertheless strikes and workers' protests were and are still taking place in post-coup Egypt. Moreover, if the Islamists movements, along with the Popular Committees as seen in the previous chapter, have been outlawed, the same did not happen with the EFITU. However, the independent trade unions are still working under the strict supervision and control of the government. This of course hindered the independence of these trade unions, reducing the scope of their activities to the same forms of irrelevant opposition pursued by other NGOs working for social and human rights. Thus, like many other non-governmental organisations working in Egypt, the EFITU have been gradually put under strict state supervision.

In this chapter, I argued that Egypt in 2011 was ready for more radical change, especially thanks to decades of strikes and workers' mobilisations in peripheral areas that culminated in the 2011 occupations in the urban centres. However, these proto-movements were too fragmented, leaderless and lacked a coherent ideology to follow through on their initial successes.

I further disentangled the attempts at the institutionalisation of the workers' movements in Egypt, which echoes the state's policy of controlling potentially strong oppositional forces during its waves of liberalisation of the Egyptian economy from the 1970s to the 2000s.

I especially focused my attention on the evolution of the workers' proto-movement in the peripheral area of Mahalla al-Kubra, due to the historical presence of industries and factories, the high number of workers' protests, the levels of labour mobilisation, and the number of independent trade unions.

The aim has been to understand the levels of political participation of the local workers analysing their electoral choices at the ballot boxes, and

especially on the occasion of the referendum for the new Constitution, where they rejected the Muslim Brotherhood's neo-liberal policies.

After the December 2006 strike in Mahalla al-Kubra, the local strike committee launched a campaign to impeach the ETUF committee paving the way for the formation of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU), later legalised after the 2011 uprisings. In 2008, the Ghazal al-Mahalla strike committee proposed a national labour strike moving beyond the workplace and becoming increasingly political. Thus, some of the leaders of such non-governmental unions, such as Kamal Abbas, and the RETAU president, Kamal Abu Eita, along with the smaller unions of teachers, health professionals and retiree associations were among the protagonists of the 2011 uprisings.

The Mahalla al-Kubra workers and farmers, involved in our second focus group, confirmed their early participation in the 2011 local protests, especially the strikes of September 2011, which brought about a change in the workers' demands asking in more general terms for better workers' rights.

However, with the electoral victory of the Muslim Brotherhood and the 2013 military takeover, it was evident that the grassroots proto-movements and the mobilised workers did not retain any benefits from the uprisings. Initially grievances were transferred to a focused opposition to the neo-liberal policies of the Muslim Brotherhood. Later on, the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU), especially at the national level, was clearly weakened by the 2013 military coup and it is currently under strict state control, despite an attempt of renewed mobilisation in December 2015 and the high number of strikes registered in the first six months of 2016.

CHAPTER SIX

GRASSROOTS' MOBILISATION IN THE MENA REGION: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

It is very controversial to assess to what extent the Egyptian 2011 uprisings and the 2013 military coup have influenced the social movements taking place in other countries of the Middle East or, in more general terms, if they have been inspired by other social movements grown elsewhere in Europe before and after the 2008 economic crisis. Were there links between the demonstrators in Tahrir Square and the anti-austerity and Occupy movements in Europe? Was there a transnational collaboration between the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Syria, Libya and other countries? Is it possible that the 2013 military takeover in Egypt strengthened the al-Assad regime in Syria? Are there sufficient connections between left-wing trade unionists in North Africa and Europe, anarchist and post-communist activists all over the world?

As a matter of fact, the 2011 uprisings in the Middle East will be remembered not only as an “Islamic Awakening” but as well as a renaissance of left-wing activism, from the formation of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) in 2011 to the Nobel Peace Prize obtained by the UGTT in Tunisia in 2015, from the entrance in the Turkish Parliament of the pro-Kurdish and leftist party HDP in 2015 to the strenuous fight against the jihadists of the Islamic State (ISIS) undertaken by the Kurds of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria⁴⁵⁶.

However, as Laura Galián has argued, these social movements did not “have a stable structure of international connections”⁴⁵⁷. In other words,

⁴⁵⁶ Acconcia, G. 'Sinistra, movimenti e guerre in Medio Oriente', *Euronomade*, 2015. Available at <http://www.euronomade.info/?p=5896>. Last time accessed on 1 October 2016.

⁴⁵⁷ Galián, L. 'New Modes of Collective Actions: The Reemergence of Anarchism in Egypt'. In Gerges, F. A., *Contentious Politics in the Middle East Popular*

even if between 2011 and 2016, a growing number of personal contacts between different individual activists or groups has been put in place all over the world, “those transnational connections are mainly to show solidarity with comrades abroad who suffer from repression or to make statements regarding the situation of other struggles”⁴⁵⁸.

Thus, even if the purported presence of Gene Sharp’s books in Tahrir Square and his ideas of non-violent resistance have been widely publicised, as much as the latest generation techniques of cyber-activism, started by Wael Ghonim, as well as the alleged tactics of non-violence assimilated by some of the Egyptian political activists studying in workshops about the techniques used during the mobilisation against the Milosevic regime in the former Yugoslavia, in 2011 many Middle Eastern activists appeared to have very poor connections with anti-regime/anti-systemic movements in other countries, despite the regime’s allegations of an “insurgency” led by foreigners.

This is especially true if we look at the Egyptian social movements. As we have seen in Chapter 3, the Egyptian leftist groups had been marginalised by the authoritarian and military regime of Hosni Mubarak and Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. As a consequence of their fragmentation, lack of organisation and leadership, they have been less focused on building-up transnational alliances, strongly prevented in doing so by the ruling elite, even in comparison to other social movements in the region.

However, if we look at the micro-dynamics of the 2011 uprisings in the MENA countries, we will find many commonalities between the patterns of mobilisation and demobilisation in the region. In this chapter I will compare the Egyptian case with other social movements that took place within urban settings in the MENA region between 2011 and 2016. I will especially focus on the workings and attempts of institutionalisation of the Popular Committees and Women Committees (Mala Gel and Mala Jin)⁴⁵⁹ in the Kobane Canton in reference to the third of the focus groups carried out in this urban district during my period of stay in Syria in the spring of 2015.

Resistance and Marginalized Activism beyond the Arab Uprisings, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 365.

⁴⁵⁸ Galián, L. in Gerges, F. A., *Contentious Politics*, p. 365.

⁴⁵⁹ Boothroyd, M. 'Self Organisation in the Syrian Revolution', *Socialist Project*, 2016. Available at <http://www.socialistproject.org/issues/august-2016/self-organisation-syrian-revolution/>. Last time accessed on 10 October 2016.

I will compare the levels of initial political participation of the components of the Popular Committees in Syria and Egypt, the way in which they perceived insecurity and the need for stability, the reasons that triggered their mobilisation and demobilisation, the attempts to institutionalise the precarious structures of the Committees, and the parallel evolution into armed paramilitary groups in the context of war.

I decided to focus on the Syrian Popular Committees because, as showed by Gelvin and anticipated in Chapter 3, formation of such grassroots mass movements emerged⁴⁶⁰ in this country already between 1918 and 1920. Local Committees were already a modern pattern of political mobilisation and an example of the attempts of a process of institutionalisation of non-state elites⁴⁶¹.

King Faisal governed Syria for two years, after World War I, between the end of the Ottoman Empire and the beginning of the French mandate⁴⁶². In a more politicised public space, an autonomous civil society pushing for the accountability of the state institutions was emerging. In this context of economic, administrative and urban transformation, new relations of power were about to surface. In other words, the domain of formal politics expanded when the state and the market were providing new functions. At that stage, the Popular Committees began to be involved in a diverse number of modern and alternative activities, partially alien to the state apparatus. Local representatives were chosen through district elections⁴⁶³. Moreover, the Popular Committees recruited their own militias. In every urban neighbourhood, they began to hold meetings to coordinate the various militia's branches which filled the vacuum due the lack of governmental control.

A century ago, the Popular Committees in Syria were proposing new power relationships: firstly, they affirmed the prerogatives of their elected members through open elections; secondly, they asked for the accountability of the urban notables controlling their resources and functions; finally, they wanted to institutionalise the electoral procedures on a national base, forming a "supervisory committee" to oversee the citizens of every neighbourhood. In this period, and as it happened in some parts of the country between 2011 and 2013, an increased number of ordinary citizens

⁴⁶⁰ Gelvin, J. *Divided Loyalties*.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶² Gelvin, J. L. 'The Social Origins of Popular Nationalism'.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*

began to contest a growing number of public issues⁴⁶⁴. In this regard, Gelvin⁴⁶⁵ argued that the Popular Committees “institutionalised and broadened horizontal and associational ties”⁴⁶⁶; they defined a new framework for social and political legitimacy, filling “the void that neither the government” or the “national organisations were structurally or ideologically capable of filling”⁴⁶⁷.

As already mentioned in Chapter 3, Popular Committees are “self-defence groups heterogeneous in their tactics, organisation, and efficacy, but a critical response to the security vacuum”⁴⁶⁸. In this chapter I argue that the Northern Syrian Popular Committees, as happened in Egypt, challenged the traditional patterns of state control over civil society building up, as partially happened in Libya as well, a new political and paramilitary structure of power.

I decided to focus on the Northern Syria Popular Committees, instead of Tunisia or Palestine, where the relevance of trade unions is historically central, as I will later discuss, because in this area the grassroots' mobilisations, organised in local committees, appeared to be as relevant as in Egypt from an early stage.

As Salwa Ismail explains⁴⁶⁹, subaltern actors in Egypt and Syria shaped differently their evolution in relation to their attitude towards the state. Compared to Egypt, in Syria, the regime' strategies of control, or *divide and rule*, over the grassroots mobilisations, manipulated subaltern forces. In other words, this process contributed to fragment the oppositionists, turning groups against each other.

However, it is not the aim of this chapter to discuss about the dynamics of the Syrian civil war but to disentangle the evolution of Popular Committees in a comparative perspective. In 2011, as el-Meehy states, the Popular Committees in Syria can be defined as “horizontal forms of

⁴⁶⁴ Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties*, p. 51.

⁴⁶⁵ Gelvin, J. 'The Social Origins of Popular Nationalism in Syria, p. 646.

⁴⁶⁶ Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties*, p. 53.

⁴⁶⁷ Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties*, p. 53.

⁴⁶⁸ Hassan, H. 'Extraordinary politics of ordinary people', pp. 383-386.

⁴⁶⁹ Ismail, S. 'Urban Subalterns in the Arab Revolutions: Cairo and Damascus in Comparative Perspective', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 55 No. 4 (2013), pp. 865-894.

committee-centered grassroots activism"⁴⁷⁰, also known as *tanseeqayat*, or "ad hoc local coordination committees"⁴⁷¹. Among the activities of the Syrian local committees in an initial stage of mobilisation: "they extended support for families of prisoners, provided emergency relief to internally displaced persons, and committed local armed groups to sign up to an ethical code of conduct for observing human rights"⁴⁷².

According to el-Meehy, the first local committees were founded in Aleppo and al-Zabadani. However, they quickly spread all over the country and, "by 2016, the number of active councils had fallen sharply to around 395"⁴⁷³ with the majority located in Northern Syria.

The initial demonstrations and riots in Northern Syria between 2011 and 2012 sparked the formation of new means of popular mobilisation, and triggered the mass participation in alternative networks that aimed at recruiting ordinary citizens to provide social services, security and self-defence. Later on, in the context of war in Northern Syria between 2013 and 2016, with the further emergence of a very diverse range of jihadist groups, including ISIS, the participants within those Popular Committees felt the need to be involved in direct action, including the armed struggle, in order to protect their neighbourhoods and substitute the constant absence of security personnel and therefore defend their properties from the attacks from a wide range of both oppositional groups and regime supporters.

Thus, in Syria those social movements evolved into paramilitary organisations, that were very different compared to the Egyptian case study where, in a context of diminishing mobilisation, they became closer to Private Voluntary Organisations than to revolutionary groups, as previously argued. At that stage, in Northern Syria the Committees were pivotal in forming armed entities, such as the People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units (YPG-YPJ) [Yekîneyên Parastina Gel-Yekîneyên Parastina Jin], that began to provide systems of patrols to guarantee local and external security, building up an embryonic autonomous government.

⁴⁷⁰ El-Meehy, A. 'Governance from Below. Comparing Local Experiments in Egypt and Syria after the Uprisings', Report Arab Politics Beyond the Uprisings, *The Century Foundation*. Available at <https://tcf.org/content/report/governance-from-below/>. Last time accessed on 10 February 2017.

⁴⁷¹ El-Meehy, A. 'Governance from Below'.

⁴⁷² El-Meehy, A. 'Governance from Below'.

⁴⁷³ El-Meehy, A. 'Governance from Below'.

It might be argued that this same kind of evolution could have been experienced by the Egyptian participants in the local committees if those participants in the 2011 uprisings would have been more closely involved in an armed insurgency or a civil war. This briefly happened during the 2013 military coup when the supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood defended the headquarters of their political party and their NGOs from the attacks of the police and ordinary citizens. However, in Egypt the armed forces quickly gained control of state institutions, laying out their own roadmap to power, by claiming the need to bring back security and “stability”.

6.1 The Kobane Canton

I decided to focus on the urban district of Kobane and its surroundings due to the sufficient level of security present after ISIS withdrew in January 2015, the proximity to the Turkish border of this relatively accessible region, compared to other parts of Syria, and the high levels of politicisation and mobilisation among the Syrian Kurds.

With the end of French colonisation, the Syrian Kurds in the three provinces of Jazira, Afrin and Kobane, were excluded both from Northern Turkish Kurdistan and isolated by the neighbours’ growing Arab nationalism⁴⁷⁴. Later, as a consequence of the Hasaka Census (1962), thousands of Syrian Kurds were left without citizenship and excluded from the labour market. At that stage, the major local pro-Kurdish left-communalist parties were founded along with 32 other smaller leftist political groups.

Those activists mobilised very little support until the aid given by the United States to the Iraqi Kurdish fighters (*peshmerga*), between 2003 and 2005. With the 2012-2013 uprisings, the Syrian Kurds joined the opposition to the al-Assad regime within the framework of the Damascus Declaration, issued in October 2005. However, with the 2011-2012 uprisings in Syria, the PYD did not join the Kurdish coalition (KNC) nor the Arab opposition groups, but began to put in practice Abdullah Öcalan’s theories⁴⁷⁵ of democratic autonomy, forging self-defence groups and organising an armed wing: the YPG/YPJ.

⁴⁷⁴ Allsopp, H., *The Kurds of Syria: Political Parties and Identity in the Middle East*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2015.

⁴⁷⁵ Bookchin, M., *The Next Revolution: Popular Assemblies and the Promise of Direct Democracy*, London, Verso, 2015.

Compared to mid-20th century approaches to guerrilla war (e.g. Mao, Guevara), the Kurdish communalist provided a non-violent critique to hierarchical and capitalist societies. As Bookchin explains⁴⁷⁶ in order to define his notion of “libertarian municipalism”,

Communalism seeks to recapture the meaning of politics in its broadest, most emancipatory sense, indeed, to fulfill the historic potential of the municipality as the developmental arena of mind and discourse. It conceptualises the municipality, potentially at least, as a transformative development beyond organic evolution into the domain of social evolution. The city is the domain where the archaic blood-tie that was once limited to the unification of families and tribes, to the exclusion of outsiders, was—juridically, at least—dissolved. It became the domain where hierarchies based on parochial and sociobiological attributes of 26 kinship, gender, and age could be eliminated and replaced by a free society based on a shared common humanity.

In Northern Syria popular assemblies have been organised; local councils have been formed in respect to ethnic and gender differences, in cooperation with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)⁴⁷⁷. The PYD has always fought in Syria and not in other adjacent countries and its autonomous struggle has been characterised by being neither supporting al-Assad nor the rebel opposition, but taking a pragmatic and situational position, depending on what would best benefit their cause⁴⁷⁸. On the one hand, the Arab moderate oppositional groups have appeared to be hostile to the Syrian Kurds' demands. They often accused the PYD of being in agreement with al-Assad against the Free Syrian Army (FSA). On the other hand, the PYD accused all the anti-Assad militias of working in coordination with the Turkish army. It is not the aim of this book to discuss the geopolitical alliances in the region. However, it is relevant to add here that, despite the 2014 worsening crisis with ISIS conquering the Northern Syrian region and Iraq, on the one hand, the Turkish government has been accused by the YPG/YPJ of delivering weapons and fighters to ISIS through the Syrian border, while never supporting the PYD due its link with the PKK, on the other hand, the Syrian Kurdish fighters have been criticised

⁴⁷⁶ Bookchin, M., *The Next Revolution*, pp. 26-27.

⁴⁷⁷ The PKK is included in their lists of designated terrorist groups by the US and the UE.

⁴⁷⁸ Allsopp, H. and Acconcia, G., 'I kurdi siriani, né con al-Assad né con le opposizioni', *Il Manifesto*, 2013. Available at http://nena-news.globalist.it/Detail_News_Display?ID=53485. Last time accessed on 1 October 2016.

by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq and some human rights organisations (e.g. Amnesty International) as utopian and exclusionary⁴⁷⁹. However, the YPG/YPJ gained some support from the US coalition against ISIS, due to its effective combat performance⁴⁸⁰.

Still, few academic studies have focused on the development of the Popular Committees in the on-going civil war in Northern Syria. In so doing, I shall try to add a better understanding of the development of grassroots' mobilisations in an urban district, considering them, as I have done in Chapter 4 with the Egyptian case study, as long-term phenomena of political mobilisation.

In this specific focus group 12 young Syrian Kurds who joined the YPG/YPJ and two Unit commanders have been involved. Diane and Rangin were the gatekeepers interviewed in order to select the YPG/YPJ fighters involved in this focus group. Firstly, we met the YPG Commander Diane at the Tall Abyad front line in June 2015, a few days before the liberation of the town from ISIS supporters. Diane spent his youth in Lebanon in contact with Abdullah Öcalan when he fled to Syria (1980-1998). He had been a YPG Commander during the battle in 2014 for the liberation of Kobane. Later, we met the YPJ Commander Rangin at the YPJ's headquarters in Kobane a few days after the liberation of Tall Abyad in June 2015. Rangin joined the YPJ in 2013, she was previously a journalist and part of the management of a local institution supporting women rights.

In a preliminary stage, Diane and Rangin were part of the process for the composition and organisation of this specific focus group. The aim was to choose male and female members of YPG/YPJ with or without a previous involvement in the Popular Committees in order to analyze the evolution of these local social movements before and after the ISIS occupation of Kobane (2014), the reasons and degrees of mobilisation and demobilisation within the social movements in the context of peace and cooperation with other oppositional groups, the levels of political participation, the personal accounts by the focus groups participants of ISIS invasion of Northern Syria in 2014, the relations between male and female members of the groups, and the evolution of civilian movements into a paramilitary and

⁴⁷⁹ Graeber, D. 'Why is the world ignoring the revolutionary Kurds in Syria?', *The Guardian*, 2014. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/08/why-world-ignoring-revolutionary-kurds-syria-isis>. Last time accessed 01/03/2017.

⁴⁸⁰ Acconcia, G., 'Il Kurdistan non è vicino', *Le guerre islamiche*, Limes, 9/2015.

then a full-fledged armed force. At the end of the two meetings we held a debriefing session with the gatekeepers in order to talk about the group dynamics and the results from these sessions.

Maslum, 22 years old, injured five times in the battles with the ISIS, was unemployed in Lebanon and joined YPG as a *heremi* (local self-defence citizen) in 2013, while his parents fled to Turkey. Agid, 18 years old, the eldest son of a farmers' family, worked as a carpenter in Istanbul before joining the YPG. Chakdar, was from Kobane and 23 years old. His parents were farmers, while he ran an electronics shop before joining the YPG. Chaidar, 21 years old from Tall Abyad, joined the YPG two years previously. His parents were unemployed living in Kobane. He worked in a mobile phone shop and one of his brothers had been killed by ISIS. Biriari, 19 years old, joined the PYD's youth group before entering the YPG. His mother was working in a centre supporting the relatives of people killed by the ISIS. Zenar, 19 years old, was a tailor, and joined the YPG six months before. Massum, 29 years old, a former construction worker, joined the YPG two years before. Rashuan, 31 years old, a house painter, joined the YPG one year previously. Filos, 29 years old, from Kobane had a brother who owned a minimarket, and he was one of seven brothers and sisters, three of whom were working abroad. He was a welder before joining the YPG. Nurshin, 18 years old, from Kobane, was a student before joining the YPJ three months previously. Cicak, 25 years old, was a student, her parents were farmers. Poldar, 19 years old from Kobane, was fighting with the YPG for one year.

The focus group was conducted in two long distinct sessions at the Tall Abyad front line and the YPJ's headquarters in Kobane in June 2015. Table XIII shows the composition of the third focus group with 14 participants of a YPG/YPJ Unit in Northern Syria.

Table XIII: Focus Group 3: Kobane Canton, YPG/YPJ

Focus group participants: 14	Two YPG/YPJ Unit commanders. Nine young men (18-31 years old), joined the YPG, some previously involved in the grassroots' activities with the PYD. Three young women (18-25 years old), joined the YPJ, some previously involved in the grassroots' activities of the PYD.
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From the very beginning, I found a promising level of interest among these activist male and female YPG/YPJ fighters. However, a number of problematic issues had to be tackled at a later stage (for example in terms of access to the field during the periods of armed combat, timing related to the daily shifts of the soldiers, presence of mines, aggressive methods of the Turkish authorities refusing to give official permissions to go to Syria, etc.). We met YPG/YPJ fighters in their camp at the Tall Abyad front line and the Kobane headquarters in June 2015 before and after the long struggle for the liberation of Tall Abyad from ISIS. If in a first stage, the access to fighters both male and female had been constantly mediated by the unit commanders who convinced them to be fully involved in the research, despite the ongoing daily fight against ISIS, the interviewees were later independently involved in the focus group.

At the beginning, the interviewees did not express any security concerns in reference to their participation in the focus group. Even in a later stage and after the liberation of Tall Abyad, the interviewees did not express any personal concern or fears or mistrust.

6.2 Hierarchy and Organisation

In this section I will describe the evolution of the Popular Committees in Northern Syria and the workings of a YPG/YPJ unit in Kobane in reference to the interviews from our third focus group. I will further highlight to what extent, in the context of war, voluntary networks of self-defence groups, forged in an increasing environment of political participation, evolved into a more structured military force, to confront to the growing emergence of jihadist fighters.

This process entails a stronger level of hierarchical organisation and the institutionalisation of daily practices both at the military and civilian levels that will probably never be needed in a less chaotic context. Those soldiers were working both to manage and defend Kobane and its surroundings sometimes with similar tasks or overlapping duties with the security and political apparatus. Commander Diane confirmed this when he defined his unit as “soldiers for the government of Kobane and the protection of the border”⁴⁸¹.

⁴⁸¹ Case 3, Interviewee 1.

This determined the need for a very structured division of duties and a continuous mobilisation of the local Popular Committees that are still working simultaneously as service providers and self-defence groups. For instance, we met groups of armed and unarmed men and women, at the crossroads of small alleys, helping ordinary citizens to reach their homes during the night due to the almost complete lack of electricity. These are *Heremi*: non-professional volunteers in plain clothes, involved in Popular Committees, protecting their villages, towns or neighbourhoods. The *YPG/YPJ* are male and female professional fighters, in military uniforms engaged in armed attacks to protect the borders. *Asayş* is the internal security or police, comprised of both men and women, in military uniforms, different from the *YPG/YPJ*. “First of all there are the local self-defence units (*heremi*), then professional fighters and finally the resistance units. Often men leave the self-defence units to join the *YPG/YPJ*”⁴⁸².

As it happens for many female fighters, Commander Rangin was not involved in the Popular Committees or within the internal police units (*Asayş*) before joining the *YPJ*. “I joined the *YPJ* initially at a professional level. Many others began as *heremi*”⁴⁸³. “I did not work within the Popular Committees before joining the *YPG/YPJ*”⁴⁸⁴. “I was not a *heremi* before joining the *YPJ*”⁴⁸⁵.

The actual experiences within this group of the other fighters are different, as confirmed by our interviewees. On the one hand, other participants in this focus group never reached a professional status and they are still form part of this unit as local self-defence volunteers⁴⁸⁶. On the other hand, some of them were *heremi* before joining the *YPG/YPJ*⁴⁸⁷. “Not all of us will be *YPJ* for all their lives. I began as a person of my neighbourhood defending and controlling our area (*heremi*)”⁴⁸⁸.

On the other hand, Commander Diane was involved in the Popular Committees before joining the *YPG*. “I have been working for Rojava (South Kurdistan) before joining the *YPG* one year ago. I was a *heremi*”⁴⁸⁹.

⁴⁸² Case 3, Interviewee 2.

⁴⁸³ Case 3, Interviewee 2.

⁴⁸⁴ Case 3, Interviewee 11.

⁴⁸⁵ Case 3, Interviewee 12.

⁴⁸⁶ Case 3, Interviewee 7.

⁴⁸⁷ Case 3, Interviewees 3, 4, 6, and 8.

⁴⁸⁸ Case 3, Interviewees 13 and 14.

⁴⁸⁹ Case 3, Interviewee 1.

Diane defined himself as a revolutionary. “I am ready to fight everywhere, I am a man of the revolution”⁴⁹⁰. Due to his long training with the PKK’s commanders in Lebanon he defended the Kurdish’s People Party and its principles. “The PKK fought for land and freedom. They fight for the concept of freedom and the human being”⁴⁹¹.

As for the composition and age of this YPG/YPJ unit’s members, it is mixed as their ethnic backgrounds⁴⁹². Those soldiers are very young, both men and women, and unmarried. After joining the YPG/YPJ they cannot marry each other. This is not the case at the *heremi* level. “There are both Kurds and Arabs. We fight together (men and women). Everything happens in friendship but the soldiers cannot marry”⁴⁹³. “As for women fighters, to be part of the YPJ is more important than a marriage. However, the local components (*heremi*), as non-professional self-defence groups, are often married people”⁴⁹⁴.

Especially within the female units, the evolution of those self-defence groups did not lead necessarily to the formation of a conventional army. “We are like every other army; we depend on the ideology of Abdullah Öcalan. But we are not only an army. We are a defensive army”⁴⁹⁵.

6.2.1 Women as Fighters

The female fighters (YPJ) appeared to be very well trained by their supervisors, as confirmed by Commander Rangin. “The more educated women often enter directly as professional combatants. In meetings we spend time discussing and self-criticising. In order to fight, women must know why and for what to fight. For this reason we begin with ideological and academic preparation, because every YPJ fighter must know her own self”⁴⁹⁶. However, according to this YPJ’s Unit Commander, there are more men than women working as local volunteers (*heremi*). “There are more

⁴⁹⁰ Case 3, Interviewee 1.

⁴⁹¹ Case 3, Interviewee 1.

⁴⁹² In October 2015 the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have been founded. This is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious alliance including Kurds, Arabs, Assyrian, Armenian, Turkmen, Circassian fighters.

⁴⁹³ Case 3, Interviewee 1.

⁴⁹⁴ Case 3, Interviewee 2.

⁴⁹⁵ Case 3, Interviewee 2.

⁴⁹⁶ Case 3, Interviewee 2.

men than women in the first level of engagement. Women usually join at a professional level”⁴⁹⁷.

Thus, there is a very noticeable women's participation, compared to Popular Committees in other MENA countries, both within self-defence groups and resistance units. They are all imbued by feminism and highly politicised⁴⁹⁸.

As Commander Rangin explained:

We stand for feminism. We depend on ourselves and benefit from the experience of everyone. Women at home protect the essentialness of women. Our fight is as women (no matter if Kurdish, Syrian or European) and for a nationality that identifies with democratic autonomy and is opposed to the concept of State. During the fighting for Shingal, for example, women went to save other women. At Til Temir, YPJ fighters went to save Arab women. We went to save dozens of women captives in villages occupied by ISIS⁴⁹⁹.

Equality between men and women fighters is an essential part of the political formation of those fighters, as much as their sexual awareness. “Love is essential, it is part of everyone's instinct. The philosophy of death is a way of living. In past times, everyone knew death could come quickly; now it is different and this disconnects us from nature and does not allow us to accept the idea of death. Religion exploits death: if you are a martyr you go to heaven. For us love and death are in contradiction”⁵⁰⁰. This discourse is closely related to a military and communitarian lifestyle. “When we discuss this, it is to search for a new military, communitarian and quotidian life. Women are not made to only have children. We want to reform and renew the community. Thus, we also talk a lot about sexuality”⁵⁰¹.

According to Rangin, this approach does not result in conflicts with the hierarchy, with male commanders. “Some men do not accept that their commanders may be a woman. If in this context the women are soldiers, it is not in vain. We have to fight against the concept that many male

⁴⁹⁷ Case 3, Interviewee 2.

⁴⁹⁸ Knapp, M., Flach, A., Ayboga, K. *Revolution in Rojava. Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan*, London, Pluto Press, 2016.

⁴⁹⁹ Case 3, Interviewee 2.

⁵⁰⁰ Case 3, Interviewee 2.

⁵⁰¹ Acconcia, G. 'La coalizione internazionale è contro l'Isis solo a parole', *Il Manifesto*, 2015. Available at <http://ilmanifesto.info/la-coalizione-internazionale-e-contro-lisis-solo-a-parole/> Last time accessed on 3 October 2016.

comrades have of women. When we talked about this with a YPG soldier, it often happened that he changed his mind and understood that the men's units exist because the YPJ exists and not vice versa"⁵⁰².

As confirmed by our interviewees, the main difference between men and women fighters, as YPG/YPJ soldiers, is that the former appeared to be more educated with some of them having completed secondary schools or wanting to study at the university once finishing with the YPJ⁵⁰³. The YPJ's headquarters in Kobane were very well organised and clean, compared to the male units. Some of these women fighters were previously married and later decided to join YPJ. "Sometimes we are forced to refuse the request to join the female fighters' unit because some women wanted to leave their children alone to be part of our group"⁵⁰⁴. "Within the local Women Houses (Mala Jin), there are crèches and other facilities for the children of the fighters"⁵⁰⁵. "Many couples, both men and women, are fighting in their respective units while there are families in which men are ordinary workers and women are fighters"⁵⁰⁶. Moreover, women wearing a scarf are accepted too. "If she (a potential YPJ fighter) is convinced to wear it we do not complain. Many YPJ fighters wear the scarf. In the Commanders' Council there are women wearing the *hijab*"⁵⁰⁷.

Thus, women are a key for understanding the peculiar system of both political management and security defence in Kobane. As Commander Rangin highlighted:

The YPJ is not a military auxiliary. Many of our female fighters have been blown skywards by mines; they are commanders (the majority of them) of male units. There is plenty of autonomy regarding this. We have mixed battalions; in almost all battalions there are co-commanders. In every army, men attack without considering the values of this community, with women as fighters they give up doing so. For instance, if Kurdish fighters do not commit ethnic cleansing after the capture of a city, it is mainly because our influence stops errors from being committed⁵⁰⁸.

⁵⁰² Case 3, Interviewee 2.

⁵⁰³ Case 3, Interviewee 2.

⁵⁰⁴ Case 3, Interviewee 2.

⁵⁰⁵ Case 3, Interviewee 2.

⁵⁰⁶ Case 3, Interviewee 2.

⁵⁰⁷ Case 3, Interviewee 2.

⁵⁰⁸ Case 3, Interviewee 2.

6.3 From Popular Committees to Fighting Units

In this section I will describe the developments within the organisation of the initial mobilised self-defence groups in Northern Syria between 2011 and 2016. In other words, I will further disentangle the process of mobilisation of the local Popular Committees' participants who often began as volunteer self-defence civilians, later on transforming themselves into YPG/YPJ's Unit professional fighters in Kobane, which forms part of the discussion in the interviews in our third focus group.

Kobane has lived in a context of constantly high mobilisation of ordinary people between 2011 and 2016. However, a standardised system of recruitment and career paths both within Popular Committees and YPG/YPJ units has not been established. A standard period of compulsory training is usually needed. "The system is not stabilised yet. There are many exceptions, especially in periods of general mobilisations. However, when local men or women become *heremi* they usually need at least three months to decide if they want to continue both as self-defence volunteers or professional fighters"⁵⁰⁹. "We do not sign any contract to be part of the YPG/YPJ"⁵¹⁰.

It is still problematic to state exactly at what stage of the Syrian civil war these groups changed their nature and transformed themselves from non-violent defenders to armed defensive units. "At the beginning of the uprisings we did not carry weapons. We depended only on the support of the ordinary people, not on weapons"⁵¹¹.

This commonly happened when the Syrian regime withdrew from the Northern regions between 2012 and 2013. In this period, YPG/YPJ commanders officially announced their armed struggle. As Commander Rangin recalled:

After the liberation of Northern Syria by the Syrian regime we took many weapons. Everything changed. At the end of 2012, we announced the beginning of our armed struggle. Later on, in the Jazira and Kobane provinces, we seized weapons. Only recently (2014), we received a number of *Kalashnikovs* from abroad, while some foreigners joined our units⁵¹².

⁵⁰⁹ Case 3, Interviewee 2.

⁵¹⁰ Case 3, Interviewee 3.

⁵¹¹ Case 3, Interviewee 2.

⁵¹² Case 3, Interviewee 2.

In the initial engagement for local volunteers in self-defence groups, the concept of legitimate defence was very important. “If someone attacks you, you have to attack him or her for legitimate defence, positive or active defence. If the attacks intensify, we intensify the attacks too. The target is to protect ourselves before the enemy attacks us”⁵¹³.

This seems to be not only a military aim but a political one too for those YPG/YPJ members. For example, as I witnessed, when those soldiers liberated Tall Abyad from ISIS (2015) they lifted the flag of their army as a symbol of both political and military power in the Kobane Canton. “Sometimes we attack militarily but we resist politically. The political and military defence are overlapping”⁵¹⁴.

6.3.1 Mobilisation and Strategy

The majority of the interviewees were politically or emotionally involved in the Syrian civil war before joining YPG/YPJ. It seems that if, at an initial stage, they joined local Committees only with the aim to protect their homes from a lack of security, but with the emergence of ISIS’s fighters and their permanent occupation of Kobane, they became highly motivated to be part of the armed struggle.

Some of them had a relative killed by ISIS and this motivated him or her to join the armed struggle⁵¹⁵. “I was a member of the Democratic youth of PYD before joining YPG. My mother is working for a local institute supporting martyrs’ families”⁵¹⁶. “One of my brothers is a martyr”⁵¹⁷. “My cousin has been killed by ISIS”⁵¹⁸. “I came from Lebanon to Syria when I knew about the ISIS’s attacks”⁵¹⁹. “I was working for the PYD before joining the YPG”⁵²⁰.

The main reason to be part of the fight against the jihadists appeared to be with the aim to protect their land from ISIS. “ISIS is our biggest

⁵¹³ Case 3, Interviewee 2.

⁵¹⁴ Case 3, Interviewee 2.

⁵¹⁵ Case 3, Interviewees 5, 9 and 14.

⁵¹⁶ Case 3, Interviewee 7.

⁵¹⁷ Case 3, Interviewee 4.

⁵¹⁸ Case 3, Interviewee 5.

⁵¹⁹ Case 3, Interviewee 3.

⁵²⁰ Case 3, Interviewee 11.

problem”⁵²¹. “We fight to protect our land”⁵²². “We fight against ISIS, to free our land and for our rights”⁵²³. “This does not mean to fight only for the Kurds but for the freedom of everybody”⁵²⁴. “I fight because I want my family back. They escaped to Turkey after the ISIS’s attacks”⁵²⁵. However, this has nothing to do with religious motivations. “They [ISIS] do things in the name of Islam, but this is not right. No religion says to shoot another man”⁵²⁶. “They are not humans, they are monsters. They do not represent Islam”⁵²⁷. The al-Assad regime did not have a better reputation among those YPG/YPJ’s soldiers, however they were more careful in their judgments. “He was controlling us”⁵²⁸.

As for the female fighters, they seemed to have as their first objective the defence of their own people and of women in more general terms. “We fight to protect our people”⁵²⁹. “I fight for the Kurdish people and the martyrs”⁵³⁰. Many of those YPJ fighters considered ISIS and Turkey as allies. “The jihadists are monsters and Turkey had much responsibility for helping them”⁵³¹. “ISIS is the first enemy of women”⁵³². “In Shingal, the jihadists were so aggressive against women, it is our duty to fight them”⁵³³. As Polda, a YPJ soldier, added, “after three months of training, I can fight everywhere in the region (Rojava). I am fighting for the freedom of my land”⁵³⁴.

Many of those fighters felt abandoned by the so-called foreign allies. For instance, the commander of this YPG’s unit did not consider as effective the support given at that stage by the airstrikes of the US-led coalition. As Commander Diane stated: “If the coalition would like to bomb a cigarette they do. But if we ask to bomb an ISIS target often they do not listen to

⁵²¹ Case 3, Interviewees 3, 4, and 5.

⁵²² Case 3, Interviewees 5, 6, 7.

⁵²³ Case 3, all the Interviewees.

⁵²⁴ Case 3, Interviewee 3.

⁵²⁵ Case 3, Interviewee 3.

⁵²⁶ Case 3, Interviewees 4 and 5.

⁵²⁷ Case 3, Interviewees 6 and 7.

⁵²⁸ Case 3, Interviewees 8 and 9.

⁵²⁹ Case 3, Interviewees 11 and 12.

⁵³⁰ Case 3, Interviewees 13 and 14.

⁵³¹ Case 3, Interviewees 12 and 13.

⁵³² Case 3, Interviewee 11.

⁵³³ Case 3, Interviewee 12.

⁵³⁴ Case 3, Interviewee 14.

our requests”⁵³⁵. However, at the lower level, the interviewees considered the US strikes as helpful while highlighting that the real enemies were the Turks. “They [US-led coalition] are helping us”⁵³⁶. “Our [Kurds’] biggest enemies are the Turks”⁵³⁷. “Turkey supports ISIS, they opened the borders to let ISIS fighters escape when we attacked them”⁵³⁸. “The US coalition is helping but they could do much more”⁵³⁹.

As for the use of weapons, according to Commander Diane, at the moment of conducting the focus group, there was a daily need to use weapons against ISIS’s fighters by his unit’s components. “They [ISIS] attack everyday even if they do not have great experience and are gradually losing their military capacity”⁵⁴⁰. However, the YPG soldiers’ engagement did not end with the liberation of Kobane from ISIS (2015). “During and after the liberation of Kobane, we had to free and control the town house by house, road by road. The jihadists were always 10 metres from us. Now we are involved in the liberation of other parts of the Canton in order to connect it with Jazira province”⁵⁴¹.

Finally, some of those fighters appeared to be willing to continue as civilians, and others as combatants, once the situation has been stabilised. “I will be a combatant after the war too. I will work for my town and my country”⁵⁴². “I joined YPJ but this will not continue until the end of my life, as I am not a professional soldier”⁵⁴³. All of them will pursue the defence of their political behavior as imbued by Öcalan’s books and experiences. “Only Öcalan’s philosophy brought us to this level. He gave us the opportunity to know who we are. He made us understand our culture”⁵⁴⁴. “Öcalan’s theory is for all nationalities”⁵⁴⁵.

Thus, it is still unclear whether, in a more stabilised environment, those fighters will go back to their civilian activities, will contribute to

⁵³⁵ Case 3, Interviewee 1.

⁵³⁶ Case 3, Interviewee 8.

⁵³⁷ Case 3, Interviewee 9.

⁵³⁸ Case 3, Interviewee 9.

⁵³⁹ Case 3, Interviewee 12.

⁵⁴⁰ Case 3, Interviewee 1.

⁵⁴¹ Case 3, Interviewee 1.

⁵⁴² Case 3, Interviewees 13 and 14.

⁵⁴³ Case 3, Interviewees 12 and 13.

⁵⁴⁴ Case 3, Interviewees 4, 5, 6, 11 and 15.

⁵⁴⁵ Case 3, Interviewees 11 and 14.

institutionalise a permanent armed wing of the PYD or will be integrated as the army and security personnel of a potentially autonomous state.

6.4 A Comparative Perspective with the Egyptian Popular Committees

In this section I will compare the workings and evolution of Popular Committees in the Cairo urban district of Sayeda Zeinab with the grassroots' mobilisation in the Northern Syrian's town of Kobane between 2011 and 2016. On the one hand, the study of the micro-dynamics of mobilisation and demobilisation in the Cairo urban space during the Egyptian 2011 uprisings and the 2013 military coup has been key in order to better understand the process of control over the mass movement perpetrated by the state. On the other hand, such micro-dynamics in Northern Syria allowed a better understanding of the evolution of the grassroots' mobilisation in a context of armed struggle and with a notable emergence of groups of jihadist fighters.

In comparison to other scholars, who examined one or the other, I have examined the Popular Committees in local urban neighbourhoods, both in Egypt and Northern Syria. If in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood monopolised the space of dissent at the micro level, the pro-Kurdish left-communalists (PYD) and the PKK followers did the same in Northern Syria. However, if the Popular Committees in Egypt evolved into social non-movements and were permanently demobilised, due to a diminishing level of popular participation and a strong state crackdown on dissent, the same did not happen in Syria. In this country, both the retraction of the state's institutions and the emergence of armed Islamists, motivated the local Committees to evolve into a more structured and professional level of mobilisation and thus forging the YPG/YPJ defensive army.

Popular Committees in Egypt and Northern Syria challenged the traditional patterns of state control over civil society. They have been a modern, self-organised and experimental system of grassroots participation. In the long term, in Egypt they have been easily integrated within the Muslim Brotherhood charities and NGOs, gradually losing their initial potential of political empowerment, or building-up initial forms of cross-class and ideologically mixed coalitions. However, in Northern Syria, they have been integrated into the power structure of PYD, forging, since 2012, a new military wing engaged in an armed struggle both against the regime

and the jihadist fighters, finally serving as political and military providers in order to defend their territory and to guarantee internal security.

In both cases, Popular Committees have been a spontaneous response to the absence of police. In Cairo, they gradually evolved into checkpoints and service providers in a first attempt to secure all the intersections between the main roads and internal alleyways, using informal methods of resistance and networks of trust. In Kobane, they quickly evolved into the military wing of the PYD, with a training period for the first level of participation, a hierarchy and a noticeable engagement of women. The female fighters appeared to be a key element of this defensive army in front line battles, internal security, and they were essential for a better integration between men and women fighters, to control ethnic divisions and provide sexual equality. Moreover, if in Egypt, petty criminals often exploited the workings of local committees, infiltrating those groups and generating a sense of insecurity, in Northern Syria, the YPG/YPJ became a professional highly motivated army, in the context of war, monopolising the vacuum left by the collapse of the al-Assad regime.

During the demobilisation process and the electoral campaigns, on the one hand, the Popular Committees in Egypt began to work as a constituency to forge new political parties or as NGOs active in different fields. On the other hand, the YPG/YPJ are still fighting for the complete liberation of Northern Syria from ISIS (2016). Thus, the local Popular Committees are still working in parallel with the military units. Some of the fighters appeared to be willing to go back to their civilian volunteer activities, after years of armed struggle. The availability of weapons, seized from the regime or provided from abroad, utterly changed the nature of these groups, motivating many young people to join this army directly at a professional level.

In Egypt the evolution of the Popular Committees into more participatory and legalised structures has been prevented by the military junta. The army and the Abdel Fattah al-Sisi presidency after the 2013 military coup banned the Popular Committees, perceived as a potentially dangerous space for building-up a renewed grassroots' mobilisation. However, in Northern Syria, with a complete lack of state institutions, these groups located their major threat as the Turkish state, whilst adopting a more nuanced approach towards the support strategically provided in some circumstances by the US-led international coalition. The movement became to play the part of a sovereign actor.

Table XIV shows in a comparative perspective the evolution of Popular Committees in reference to our two case studies: Egypt (Sayeda Zeinab) and Northern Syria (Kobane).

Table XIV: The Evolution of Popular Committees in Egypt and Northern Syria

Case Studies	Popular Committees
Egypt (Sayeda Zeinab)	In Egypt, Popular Committees are a long-term phenomenon which was a spontaneous response to the absence of the police. They challenged the traditional patterns of state control over civil society. They gradually evolved into checkpoints and service providers. They began to work as a constituency to forge new political parties or as NGOs active in different fields. The Muslim Brotherhood monopolised the space of dissent at the micro level, while Popular Committees evolved into social non-movements and were permanently demobilised. In Egypt the evolution of the Popular Committees into more participatory and legalised structures has been prevented by the military junta.
Northern Syria (Kobane)	In Northern Syria, Popular Committees are a spontaneous response to the absence of the state. The PYD and PKK's followers, monopolised these groups. Both the retraction of the state's institutions and the emergence of armed Islamists, motivated the local Committees to evolve into a more structured and professional level of mobilisation, forging the YPG/YPJ defensive army, with a training period for initial recruits, a hierarchy and a noticeable engagement of women. The availability of weapons seized from the regime or provided from abroad greatly changed the nature of these groups. With the complete lack of state institutions, these groups perceived the Turkish engagement in the region as detrimental for their survival but displayed a more nuanced approach towards the support strategically provided by the US-led international coalition.

Conclusion

Left-wing activism has been boosted by the 2011 uprisings in the MENA region. If we look from a bottom-up perspective at the uprisings, although the ongoing social movements did not have strong international connections both within the region and worldwide, there are many commonalities between the patterns of mobilisation and demobilisation within mobilised groups between these countries. This is especially true if we look in a comparative perspective to the grassroots' mobilisation in Egypt and Northern Syria.

In this chapter I tried to compare the workings of the Egyptian Popular Committees in the Cairo urban neighbourhood of Sayeda Zeinab with the local mobilisations in the Kobane Canton (Rojava) leading to the formation of the People and Women's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ) in reference to the interviews carried out for my third focus group in this urban district in 2015.

I decided to focus on the Syrian Popular Committees because both in Egypt and Northern Syria the initial grassroots mobilisation challenged the traditional patterns of state control over civil society. Later on, in the context of war in Northern Syria, the participants within those Popular Committees felt the need to be engaged in an armed struggle in order to protect their neighbourhoods and fight against the growing emergence of jihadist fighters.

Thus, in Syria the social proto-movements evolved into paramilitary organisations. In other words, they were paramount in forming armed entities, such as the YPG-YPJ. This clearly surfaced when the Syrian regime withdrew from the Northern regions of the country in 2012 and those units' commanders officially announced their armed struggle.

This process determined a stronger level of hierarchical organisation and the still ongoing institutionalisation of daily practices both at the military and civilian levels with very noticeable women's participation, both within self-defence groups and the resistance units. If in a preliminary stage, the interviewees joined local Committees with the primary aim to protect their homes due to a lack of security, later on they became highly motivated to be part of the armed struggle, especially with the emergence of ISIS fighters and their permanent occupation of Kobane.

Examining the Popular Committees as a long-term and politicised phenomenon, at the urban level in Egypt and Northern Syria, allowed us to better understand the process of control over the mass uprisings sparked in response to state repression of peaceful protest by these emergent grassroots' organisations, as well as understanding the second phase of the growth of hierarchical structures in response to the outbreak of full-scale war in Syria.

CHAPTER SEVEN

GRASSROOTS' MOBILISATIONS IN THE MENA REGION: TUNISIA AND TURKEY

In this chapter I will analyze the other practices in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings in the MENA region with reference to social movements and political parties that grew after the upheaval. I will further assess whether it is reasonable to argue that workers' movements succeeded in Tunisia while they failed in Egypt. I will also assess whether the People's Democratic Party (HDP) in Turkey was the most successful example of an effective left-wing party possessing a structured organisation strengthened by the popular mobilisations.

I will argue that despite greater autonomy towards the state institutions compared to the Egyptian Trade Unions Federation (ETUF) the aforementioned non-state actors had a varied but at times important impact, certainly in Tunisia and less so in Turkey.

7.1 The UGTT in Tunisia

In this section I will describe the evolution of the Tunisian labour unions and their response to workers' mobilisations. It will be argued that, compared to Egypt the UGTT has always had an autonomous space for mobilisation both during the regime of Ben Ali and in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings. The eventual success of the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet⁵⁴⁶ and the agreement between trade unionists and Islamists have been the most important achievements of the Tunisian uprisings leaving both groups a certain space for manoeuvre after the end of Ben Ali's regime.

⁵⁴⁶ The Quartet is composed by the UGTT, the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA), the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH) and the Tunisian Order of Lawyers.

7.1.1 From the CGTT to the UGTT

In 1925, the CGTT, Confederation Générale Tunisienne du Travail (*al-Jami'a al-'amma al-tunisiyya lil-shughl*), was dissolved by the French authorities after strikes and workers' mobilisations⁵⁴⁷.

However, the nationalist New Liberal Constitutional Party (*Neo-Destour*) sought to rebuild a national labour federation. In 1944, the UGTT, Union Général Tunisienne du Travail (*al-Ittihad al-'amm al-tunisi lil-shughl*) was formed as the “largest civic organisation” with a national base in Tunisia mobilising thousands of workers⁵⁴⁸. This renewed trade unionism was built on the southern axis of Gafsa-Sfax and Kerkennah. In other words, the first workers' mobilisations arose from the historic inequalities between interior-southern and coastal regions in Tunisia.

A well-known socialist, Ahmed Ben Saleh, supported by President Habib Bourghiba, was the UGTT's leader until independence. Ben Saleh became the new Minister of Planning and Finance in 1961, adopting a “peripheral Keynesianism”⁵⁴⁹ in parallel with the reforms carried out in Egypt by Gamal Abdel Nasser. As Beinín argues, at this stage, the UGTT resisted wage austerity, retaining “a certain degree of autonomy from the state and the ruling party and credibility among its base”⁵⁵⁰. The UGTT was always a “weak link”⁵⁵¹ for the Tunisian regime.

When Tunisia abandoned the socialist experiment, Bourghiba continued to support a strong presence of the state in the public sector, giving to the UGTT the right to negotiate with the national association of employers and the government. The UGTT represented “the interests of the working class rather than as a component of a nationalist united front”⁵⁵². This autonomy by state institutions had underpinned the UGTT's activities during major strikes throughout the 1970s⁵⁵³.

⁵⁴⁷ Beinín, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 13.

⁵⁴⁸ Beinín, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 14.

⁵⁴⁹ Beinín, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 20.

⁵⁵⁰ Beinín, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 24.

⁵⁵¹ Ayari, M. B., Geisser, V., Krefa, A. 'Chronique d'une révolution [presque] annoncée', *L'année du Maghreb*, CNRS éd., Paris, 2011, pp. 359-384.

⁵⁵² Beinín, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 32.

⁵⁵³ Among the most relevant were the Sogitex textile factory mobilisations in Kasr Hellal (1977-1978).

After having declared Bourghiba as medically incapacitated, Zine El Abine Ben Ali succeeded as president in 1987. His economic policy had as its first target the implementation of policies of liberalisation, in a similar manner to what was happening in Egypt, such as the Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Program (ERSAP), and cuts to public expenditures, in order to be eligible for IMF loans and in line with the Washington Consensus.

At that stage, Islamists had begun to work in the Tunisian trade unions. For this reason, the UGTT started to be considered as a reliable partner for the regime with the aim, on the one hand, to control the local Islamists (Ennahda) and, on the other hand, to control the spread of strikes⁵⁵⁴. Nevertheless, the traditional autonomy of the UGTT from the state was kept intact. As Beinin argues, “despite the UGTT leadership's demonstrations of 'national responsibility', it never succeeded in completely eliminating the politics and culture of class struggle”⁵⁵⁵.

Thus, the UGTT slowed down Ben Ali's privatisation process of the public sector. However, Tunisia witnessed very high levels of poverty and unemployment on the eve of the 2011 mobilisations. In the previous decades the Ben Ali government often manipulated the unemployment rates among the young cohorts⁵⁵⁶, artificially reducing the officially reported levels of poverty so the full extent of this problem was hidden from the public.

In the 2000s, multifaceted social movements in opposition to Ben Ali's presidency grew. The Left was well represented within the unions of primary and secondary school teachers, health, postal, and telecommunication workers, air and railway transport workers, and phosphate miners.

In 2004, the regional unions of Sfax, Kairoun, Mahdia and Jendouba rejected the candidature of Ben Ali for a fourth term. However, on the one hand, the national leaders of the UGTT did not look for a confrontation with Ben Ali's regime. On the other hand, between 1996 and 2007, the number of strikes and labour mobilisations increased, especially in the manufacturing sector. Table XV shows the number of strikes in Tunisia between 1996 and 2007:

⁵⁵⁴ Beinin, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 52.

⁵⁵⁵ Beinin, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 54.

⁵⁵⁶ Beinin, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 57.

Table XV: Number of Strikes in Tunisia between 1996 and 2007

Year	Number of Strikes
1996	300
1997	305
1998	277
1999	308
2000	411
2001	380
2002	345
2003	395
2004	391
2005	466
2006	392
2007	382

Source: Beinin, *Workers and Thieves*, 2015⁵⁵⁷.

7.1.1 The UGTT and the 2011 Uprisings in Tunisia

Yousfi argues that during the 2011 uprisings in Tunisia the UGTT represented the “heart of the coordination between the diverse actors of the protests: lawyers, oppositionists, and the youth”⁵⁵⁸.

The ruling elite tolerated a space of “debate, disagreement and militancy”⁵⁵⁹ within the UGTT. This is the major difference if we compare the Tunisian labour unions with the ETUF in Egypt. The Egyptian state unions were under complete government control during the Mubarak presidency while independent unions grew in peripheral areas (See Chapter 4). Moreover, compared to Egypt, the UGTT did organise in the private sector⁵⁶⁰. In other words, the UGTT can be defined as a “complex organisation”, an umbrella of “sector-based mobilisations”⁵⁶¹.

⁵⁵⁷ Beinin, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 72.

⁵⁵⁸ Bozonnet, C. 'Le syndicat UGTT, Nobel de la paix et «pièce maîtresse du dialogue national» en Tunisie', *Le Monde*, available at: http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2015/12/10/l-ugtt-a-ete-la-piece-maitresse-du-dialogue-national-tunisien_4829048_3212.html. Last time accessed on 22 December 2016.

⁵⁵⁹ Beinin, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 73.

⁵⁶⁰ Beinin, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 74.

⁵⁶¹ *Ibid.*

The impoverishment of the internal and southern regions brought about new waves of labour mobilisation. One of the most important was the 2008 “rebellion” in the Gafsa phosphate mining basin: a series of riots carried out by teenagers and young men “against poverty and unemployment intensified by the local implementation of neoliberal structural adjustment in the phosphate industry, [...] and a rebellion against the local face of autocracy and corruption”⁵⁶². The local political parties and independent leftwing activists gave some support as well to the Gafsa workers.

In other words, the failure of the strategic plans and privatisations, and increasing unemployment were among the most important factors that caused the 2011 uprising in Tunisia. This had happened because, in the 2000s, even the UGTT generally accepted the government policies concerning labour flexibility and privatisations⁵⁶³.

In its history, the UGTT has always suffered due a contradiction between the expectations for more participation of the working class and the acceptance of governmental labour policies. In other words, while the Tunisian production system increasingly overlapped with the interests of the state institutions⁵⁶⁴, many UGTT's members were asking for a more democratic debate within the trade union federation, but with little success.

Daily demonstrations took place in December 2010 in the town of Sidi Bouzid after the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi, a street vendor who died in hospital on January 5 2011. “No to misery, no to unemployment!” and “Work, Freedom and Social Justice” were among the slogans of the opposition⁵⁶⁵. Moreover, the police violently dispersed several lawyers' sit-ins in Tunis. Just as in Egypt (see Chapter 2), in Tunisia the end to police brutality was a key demand of the demonstrators.

The mobilisations increasingly involved the towns of the center-west and lawyers all over the country. They obtained the support of the UGTT local branches as well, despite their shrinking autonomy from the state during the last years of Ben Ali's presidency⁵⁶⁶. As Hamzaoui argues, never were

⁵⁶² Beinin, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 83.

⁵⁶³ Hamzaoui, S. *Champ politique et syndacalisme en Tunisie, Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, CNRS éd., Paris, 2002, p. 372.

⁵⁶⁴ Hamzaoui, 'Champ politique et syndacalisme', p. 377.

⁵⁶⁵ Beinin, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 101.

⁵⁶⁶ Beinin, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 103.

the state and the trade unions more interlinked in Tunisia as in the 1990s and 2000s⁵⁶⁷.

Assessing the role of the national trade union confederation in the mobilisation of these crucial demonstrations is rather difficult. According to Hamzaoui, the UGTT's support for the demonstrations was the "most important factor for the success of the movement"⁵⁶⁸, while Gobe argues for a more nuanced appraisal: the UGTT leaders at the national level swung between a "crony compromise" with the regime and support for the social movements⁵⁶⁹.

As a matter of fact, the UGTT allowed for the politicisation of street slogans and the geographical extension of the social movements in Tunisia. Three UGTT members took part in the interim government of Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi. On February 11 2011, left-wing parties, NGOs, and Ennahda, with the support from the UGTT and the Bar Association formed the National Council to Protect the Revolution⁵⁷⁰.

In the aftermath of the uprisings, the UGTT initiated internal reform⁵⁷¹. Leftists, not revolutionaries, became a significant presence in the UGTT albeit with the clear marginalisation of women. Meanwhile Moncef Marzouki, leader of the moderate leftist group Congress for the Republic, became the interim president.

As Beinin argues, "the polarisation of the Tunisian politics between Islamists and secularists compelled much of the radical left to unite"⁵⁷². However, neither the UGTT nor Ennahda fully accepted their reciprocal legitimacy. For example, the Islamists stigmatised the UGTT collaboration with the Ben Ali government in the previous years.

Meanwhile, the number of strikes in Tunisia between 2010 and 2012 increased from 420 to 524 per year⁵⁷³. The UGTT announced general strikes in Kasserine, Gafsa, Sidi Bouzid, and Sfax to challenge the

⁵⁶⁷ Hamzaoui, 'Champ politique et syndacalisme', p. 370.

⁵⁶⁸ Beinin, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 103.

⁵⁶⁹ Ayari, M. B., 'Chronique d'une révolution', pp. 359-384.

⁵⁷⁰ Beinin, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 106.

⁵⁷¹ Beinin, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 123.

⁵⁷² Beinin, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 125.

⁵⁷³ Beinin, J. *Workers and Thieves*, p. 127.

Islamists who were increasingly taking control of the Parliament and the Constituent Assembly.

With the example of growing repression in Egypt, in Tunisia Ennahda sought to avoid the fate of the Muslim Brotherhood and asked to join the National Salvation Front to help conclude the process of writing the Constitution. As a consequence of this decision to compromise, falling back on its long term tradition of accommodation with state power, the UGTT abandoned street protests for a more moderate position of negotiation with the authorities.

The catalyst role of police violence in the activities of the Left during the Tunisian 2011 uprisings is epitomised by the murder of the political activist, Chokri Belaid. Seddik argues for the involvement of the police, or rogue elements of the police in his murder. "Several autonomous groups within the security apparatus were growing in the aftermath of the uprisings"⁵⁷⁴. The murder of Chokri Belaid was considered as an attack on the Tunisian Left as a whole and, to a certain extent, a method to stymie more radical demands posed to the government. "All the Tunisian leftists have been symbolically targeted with his murder. This was an evident threat to all the more radical oppositionists in order to ask them to withdraw their revolutionary demands"⁵⁷⁵. The Tunisian Left modulated its demands in light of this threat.

Despite a context of political violence, on January 26, 2014 the Tunisian constitution guaranteeing equality between men and women was approved. Moreover, workers and the Left established a significant presence in the Tunisian Parliament. According to Yousfi, the UGTT had been vital for the success of the process of national dialogue⁵⁷⁶ in the aftermath of the uprisings. The UGTT mediation between the different social actors participating in the revolts and within the Quartet, gave the Tunisian trade unions a strong national legitimacy. This national dialogue allowed a quicker resolution to the internal conflicts between the different forces of the opposition, to conclude the process of the drafting of the Constitution, and to establish procedures for future national elections.

⁵⁷⁴ Bozonnet, C. 'Le syndicat UGTT'.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

Thus, the UGTT became “a symbolic refuge of the political and organisational spontaneous movements”⁵⁷⁷. However, in the transitional period towards a more democratic political civil society, the UGTT did not bring about a more equal redistribution of wealth or help lower unemployment rates⁵⁷⁸. Thus in the aftermath of the events the UGTT is still very divided between those who want a negotiation with the government and the European Union for better labour conditions and those who stand for a more radical change to prevailing neo-liberal political policies within the Tunisian labour market.

7.2 The HDP in Turkey

Despite the ongoing repression carried out by the Turkish authorities, in this section I will argue that the People's Democratic Party (HDP), in the aftermath of the Gezi Park movement (2013), has been one of the more successful example of a left-wing oriented group, which had participated in recent grassroots' protests in the MENA region. Thus with important electoral victories after its entrance, for the first time in Turkish history, it entered the Parliament (2015), albeit the authoritarian turn of the Turkish government has severely threatened this breakthrough. It is not the aim of this book to discuss the Gezi Park movement, but I will disentangle the circumstances which led to the transformation of this social proto-movement into a political party. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, this did not happen in Egypt where the proto-movements never evolved into stable political parties.

The repression of the PKK intensified with the military coup in Turkey in 1980. Among those who left the country after the coup, was the leader of the party, Abdullah Öcalan. He left Turkey in 1980 and then found refuge in Lebanon and Iraq. The Syrian Kurds gave him protection until 1998. However, the PKK fighters who decided to stay in the southern regions of Turkey were harshly repressed. Thus, the attempts to forge a united front of Kurdish resistance forces provoked a severe response from the Turkish military.

The first attempts to begin a national dialogue between the Turkish authorities and the PKK took place in 1993. However, it did not last long. The attacks against the Turkish army led by one of the leaders of the party,

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

Shamedin Sakik, in Bingöl, brought about 33 deaths, and undermined the peace process. At this stage, the armed struggle restarted and the Turkish state responded with repressive measures.

In 1998, Öcalan was obliged to leave Syria by the then President Hafez al-Assad and he was captured in Kenya and imprisoned by the Turks in 1999. Since then, Öcalan has sent messages encouraging the peace process with the Turkish authorities. In the same year, 500 PKK fighters were killed by Turkish soldiers while they were leaving the country, despite being allowed to do so by the decision taken during political dialogue with the Turkish authorities aimed at implementing the peace process.

Despite a context of political violence, since 2003, the pro-Kurdish Left communalists (HDP) grew in Turkey as a democratic alternative to support both the demands of the minorities and the working class. However, the entire credibility of the peace process was undermined between 2007 and 2008, with Turkish military attacks on the PKK headquarters in the Turkish, Iranian and Iraqi mountains. However, in 2013, in a letter on the occasion of *Newrooz* (the Kurdish New Year), Öcalan encouraged the end of the armed struggle again. Ten conditions for the peace process were announced in 2015 at the Dolmabahçe Palace in Istanbul by the HDP's MP, Sirri Surreya Önder.

After taking part in urban mobilisations in 2013, at the June 2015 elections, the HDP garnered 13% of the votes, obtaining the possibility to enter the Turkish Parliament: the HDP won 80 MPs for the first time in its political history, receiving more than 90% of the votes in some provinces controlled by its local political affiliate, the Peace and Democracy Party (Bdp). However, before the elections, the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and the Turkish government decided to put an end to the peace process due the increasing presence of the HDP in the Parliament. The HDP leadership tried to steer clear of the PKK in order to not give Erdogan an excuse to crack down on them.

As the HDP's MP, Ziya Pir explains, in an interview carried out for this book:

The HDP had no organic links with the PKK. However, their electoral constituencies are overlapping. AKP politicians know this well. Thus they orchestrated dozen of provocations against the HDP headquarters during the months preceding the elections. But we never reacted for a specific

reason: if the PKK fights, the HDP loses its votes. Thus, our decision has always been to resist any provocation⁵⁷⁹.

Although the entrance of the HDP in the Turkish Parliament was reaffirmed in the elections that took place on November 1 2015, in this case, the AKP obtained 40% of the votes, allowing the Islamists to form a stronger government and promote constitutional reforms pressing for more presidential powers. In parallel, several large terrorist attacks hit the country at Suruç (at the border with Syrian Kurdistan), Ankara and Istanbul, while more recently the Turkish army has launched daily attacks on the PKK headquarters and southern towns controlled by the pro-Kurdish Left communalists, with the aim of preventing territorial and personal contacts with the Syrian Kurdish guerrillas (See Chapter 6).

As Zubaida noted in an interview for this book, “the Turkish authorities attacked the PKK to motivate the Turkish nationalists to support them”⁵⁸⁰. After the July 15 2016 failed military coup, the immunity of the HDP's MPs was revoked, while the national leaders of the party, Salahettin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, were arrested, together with the mayors of many southern municipalities controlled by the BDP.

According to the HDP political leaders, the Turkish authorities are engaged in fighting against Kurdish rights, female equality and democratic freedoms. As Yüksekdağ argues in another interview held for this book,

The ban on the immunity for our MPs had the aim to undermine female political participation. However, all the attempts to put under state control the HDP will fail in the long term. We will continue fighting with the same tenacity of the Rojava's women fighters who combat against ISIS. We want to overturn gender inequalities in Turkey. In doing so, we want to fight against any kind of political barbarism. For this reason, Erdogan and the AKP will never forgive us⁵⁸¹.

To conclude, due to the electoral victories, the HDP in Turkey is a good example of left-wing political party that enhanced its popular support after the recent mobilisations. However, as a consequence of the strong and ongoing political repression carried out by the Turkish authorities, it still has a very limited political impact on Turkish law making or the formation of public policy.

⁵⁷⁹ Interviewee 27.

⁵⁸⁰ Interviewee 2.

⁵⁸¹ Interviewee 28.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I analyzed the mobilisations of diverse non-state actors in the MENA region in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings. If in Chapter 6, the evolution of Popular Committees from self-defence groups to armed entities has been discussed in reference to the case of Northern Syrian, in this chapter, the examples of the Tunisian trade unions (UGTT) and the People's Democratic Party (HDP) in Turkey have been discussed in order to show how in other contexts the initial mobilisations determined or enhanced the formation of more structured left-wing opposition both as trade unions and political parties.

Compared to the ETUF in Egypt, the UGTT in Tunisia gained a certain autonomy from the state. Moreover, the Tunisian trade unions were organised in the private sector: this never happened in Egypt. Thus, on the occasion of the 2011 uprisings, the UGTT has been crucial for the mobilisation and expansion of a successful movement and was vital for the formation of a broad coalition that had as its first aim a comprehensive democratic transition. This probably happened in Tunisia, because both socialists and Islamists feared that an Egyptian road to repression after the al-Sisi's takeover in 2013 could completely undermine their aspirations for political participation if it was taken in Tunisia. Though the UGTT remained an active and legal player in national politics, it did little to advance the distribution of wealth or the realisation of more acceptable terms and conditions for the working class.

The political path of the HDP in Turkey is a good example of a recent regional left-wing social movement that succeeded in converting itself into a party contesting parliamentary elections. In this instance grassroots' mobilisations had time to organise and structure their opposition to the traditional party political system and evolve into an effective political party with a significant constituency, albeit with limited national political impact. This happened despite the ongoing intense confrontation between the PKK and the Turkish authorities.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

In this book, I applied theories relating to SMs and NSMs to the MENA region in order to study the so-called “Arab Spring”. I focused on the Egyptian case trying to go beyond Tahrir Square and describe the political and organisational micro-dynamics of the upheaval both in urban and peripheral areas.

As I will further assess, there have been main results of this research: to acknowledge the reasons that determined the impossibility to forge cross-ideological coalitions between Socialists and Islamists in the aftermath of the upheaval; to compare Egypt and Syria in terms of grassroots' mobilisations; to analyze the 2011 uprisings as a “Leftwing Awakening” instead of an “Islamic Awakening”, as they have been often portrayed.

The Egyptian case

The protests that took place in the public space in this country were not an exception but part of a longstanding and already normalised struggle against state repression perpetrated for decades in this authoritarian regime. In particular, alternative forms of contentious actions, emerged as a number of fragile and diverse social movements, were able to mobilise a growing number of activists and ordinary citizens.

According to Bayat, who especially focused his studies on the Iranian Revolution (1979), the notion of non-movements refers to “collective actions of non-collective actors”⁵⁸². Those networks materialise in public space where the subaltern urban classes share their discontent collectively and try to defend their small gains.

⁵⁸²Bayat, A. *Life as Politics*, p. 14.

As Abdelrahman argued, “the pro-democracy movement in Egypt had evolved into a network of networks”⁵⁸³. However, in the Introduction, I tried to challenge partially this approach arguing that all those new networks among subalterns had little to do with democracy. The main target of those activists and ordinary citizens was to defeat the violent practices of the local police. In Egypt the aggressive attitudes of the security apparatus emanates from the police station and become an “instrument of punishment and deterrence”⁵⁸⁴.

During the 2011 uprisings, many other political oppositionists were protesting for better life conditions and more justice within their workplace. Only a very limited number of young people had as their slogan the need for a democratic transition. However, even among them, there was a great confusion as to what this meant and which parameters it had to entail to an extent that, at the end of the day, the Muslim Brotherhood leaders paradoxically appeared to be the most democratic among the non-democrats.

Before the end of the occupation of Tahrir Square, the protests in the “Egyptian Street” elaborated new forms of organisation, outside the formal political parties. The opposition to the Mubarak regime already determined certain levels of cross-political and cross-class cooperation. Thus, January 25 2011, one of the biggest demonstration in the history of the country, was evidence of a great opportunity for these activists to build-up a more concrete platform of contentious politics.

Thus, in this book I have argued that, in the Egyptian case, the encounter in the public space, during the initial mass mobilisation and afterword, both in urban and peripheral areas, between a more organised political group (the Muslim Brotherhood) with less structured activists (marginalised citizens, workers and anti-police protesters) disrupted the agency and demands of the social actors in the streets.

Methodology and Chapter Outline

In this book, I studied the patterns of mobilisation and demobilisation at the micro level during the 2011 uprisings by applying the literature concerning Social Movements and New Social Movements (Abdelrahman, Alexander,

⁵⁸³Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt's Long Revolution*, p. 30.

⁵⁸⁴Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt's Long Revolution*, p. 48.

Bayat, della Porta, Gelvin, Owen, Tripp, Hanieh) to the Egyptian case. In other words, I tried to disentangle how the recent demonstrations in Egypt led to a transition that transformed the country from an authoritarian to a military regime.

This book has been comprised of 58 interviews: 28 semi-structured interviews with intellectuals and activists engaged in the study of the MENA region or active in the protests; and participatory research divided in three focus groups, conducted in Sayeda Zeinab (Cairo), Mahalla al-Kubra (Nile Delta) and Kobane (Northern Syria), involving 30 interviewees.

The empirical research involved Egyptian activists (e.g. the Revolutionary Socialists, the Socialist Alliance, and the Young Islamists), intellectuals and economists (e.g. professors, writers, and bloggers), stakeholders and trade unionists, workers and ordinary citizens, army and police officers, YPG/YPJ commanders and fighters in Syrian Kurdistan. Table XVI shows the number of interviewees per relevant entity.

Table XVI: Number of Interviewees

Semi-structured interviews	28
Participatory research	30
Total	58

The access to the fieldwork has been very problematic especially as a consequence of the increasing repressive measures taken after the 2013 military coup in Egypt and the spread of jihadist groups in Syria in recent years. At the beginning, the interviewees did not express any security concerns in reference to their participation in the focus groups. However, after the 2014 presidential elections in Egypt, the local trade unionists, involved in the second focus group conducted in Mahalla al-Kubra, appeared to be more concerned about voicing their opinions and then some of the workers asked to be mentioned only with their first names in order to be less noticeable.

The first aim of this book has been to limit the definition of the mobilisation from a common understanding of an ongoing revolutionary process and a subsequent initialised democratic transition to uprisings with little hope to succeed, and subsequently completely demobilised by a military takeover, as discussed in the Introduction.

In Chapter 2, I presented a literature review of Social Movement Theories (SMT), New Social Movements (NSM) and alternative networks and I applied it to the 2011 uprisings and the 2013 military coup in Egypt. In Chapter 3, I disentangled the patterns of political participation within the social movements, the repression of the military apparatus, applying the notion of class to the Egyptian case study.

On the one hand, the Popular Committees, as discussed in Chapter 4, were the most important movement mobilised within the public space able to attract both left-wing and Islamists sympathisers. They had been tolerated by the Mubarak regime giving them the opportunity to be one of the most interesting entities to fight against the ordinary repression of the state both in a chaotic and more stabilised political environment.

On the other hand, workers' movements, as discussed in Chapter 5, for a decade, have constantly been the protagonists of anti-regime collective actions in the workplace. In 2011, the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), led by pro-regime figures with the aim to "regiment the working class"⁵⁸⁵ appeared too compromised in order to represent genuinely workers' rights, leaving space for new forms of labour organisation. The protests spread even to companies owned by the military apparatus, involving both blue and white collar workers⁵⁸⁶, and led to the formation of strike committees which later evolved into independent trade unions: perhaps the most important achievement of the 2011 uprisings in Egypt.

In Chapters 6 and 7, I provided a comparative perspective for the study of Popular Committees and grassroots mobilisations in the Middle East with reference to the Kurdish mobilisation in Northern Syria and Turkey, the UGTT in Tunisia.

The Utopia to Forge a Cross-Ideological Coalition

As anticipated in Chapter 2, in this section I will try to summarise the reasons why the different strands of the Egyptian opposition were not able to form a political coalition after the end of the occupation of Tahrir Square.

⁵⁸⁵ Achgar, G. in Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt's Long Revolution*, p.54.

⁵⁸⁶ Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt's Long Revolution*, p. 55.

In this book, I applied to the Egyptian case the patterns of inter-organisational cooperation among social movements' organisations, advanced by della Porta and Diani⁵⁸⁷. The categories of factionalism, neutrality, competitive cooperation and noncompetitive cooperation helped us to define the nature of the relations among the different strands of the Egyptian opposition throughout the different stages of the 2011 uprisings.

The agreement to form inclusive, sustainable and effective coalitions, partially existing during the rule of Mubarak, appeared to be irrelevant in a context of enhanced political freedoms. As Abdelrahman explained, "the nature of coalitions forged under Mubarak [...] was of little value for the formation of a sustainable revolutionary coalition after the uprisings"⁵⁸⁸.

The cross-ideological cooperation of the 1990s between Socialists and Islamists, especially successful within student movements and often forged in prison, was no longer fashionable. It seemed that this cooperation was tactical, short-term, only forced by the weakness of each distinct group of activists: "they could not independently to each other counter the repression of the regime"⁵⁸⁹. From the 1970s the Left started to be manipulated by Sadat, as happened with the Muslim Brotherhood on the Right, and was marginalised. Before the uprisings, as many components of the *Kifaya* group argued, the Left was losing its constituency. In other words, it was absent from the "Egyptian Street".

On the other hand, the "middle generation" of the Muslim Brotherhood appeared to have a more pragmatic approach. Despite the rooted prejudice of many leftists towards the Islamists, many new leaders of the movement liked to be portrayed as authentic democrats, with democracy not *sharia* as their priority⁵⁹⁰, and willing to forge new alliances especially with the leftists⁵⁹¹.

However, to find the ground for structured cooperation has been very problematic. As Abdelrahman argued, "managing cooperation in joint

⁵⁸⁷ Della Porta, D. and Diani, M. *Social Movements*, p.157.

⁵⁸⁸ Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt's Long Revolution*, p. 93.

⁵⁸⁹ Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt's Long Revolution*, p. 98.

⁵⁹⁰ Naguib, S. in Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt's Long Revolution*, p. 103.

⁵⁹¹ Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt's Long Revolution*, p. 95.

action was a very time and energy-consuming task for activists”⁵⁹². If, on the one hand, workers, anti-police activists, leftists and marginalised citizens appeared to be willing to be engaged in a more confrontational politics towards the regime, on the other hand, the Muslim Brotherhood appeared to be constantly negotiating their presence in the “Egyptian Street”, their participation in the elections, and their level of contentious actions with the military junta. Thus, many leftists have never seen the advantage of working with moderate Islamists in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings⁵⁹³.

In more general terms, it might be argued that a cross-ideological movement did not develop in Egypt given almost a century of conflicts between Islamists, nationalists and Secular groups. However, despite a mass workers' movement challenging the core structures of the Egyptian state, even a potentially more structured and unified cross-class movement, could have ended up with similar limited outcomes, as it happened during the recent upheaval.

The Army as a Non-Revolutionary Agency

Between February 2011 and June 2013, the military junta decided to foster the Muslim Brotherhood as their “civilian partner”⁵⁹⁴ to avoid internal and external criticism that a direct political takeover would have entailed.

On the other hand, the Muslim Brotherhood made “grave miscalculations”⁵⁹⁵ accepting an alliance with the *Salafi* groups, a “strategic error”⁵⁹⁶, overestimating the popularity of their political neo-liberal vision. In other words, they deepened the already existing divisions among the different strands of Egyptian opposition groups. Some of the components of the secular opposition tried to be united in the National Salvation Front (NSF). However, they appeared to have “nothing in common”⁵⁹⁷ and, in the ballot boxes, they demonstrated to have inconsistent “links with the Egyptian masses”⁵⁹⁸.

⁵⁹² Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt's Long Revolution*, p. 107.

⁵⁹³ Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt's Long Revolution*, p. 110.

⁵⁹⁴ Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt's Long Revolution*, p. 113.

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹⁷ Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt's Long Revolution*, p. 115.

⁵⁹⁸ Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt's Long Revolution*, p. 114.

As a consequence, the three streams of the Egyptian oppositionists never merged into a revolutionary force. In other words, between marginalised citizens, anti-police protesters and workers, there was not sufficient cooperation or even contacts to forge a more comprehensive anti-regime front. “The inability to merge the forces engendered by the different struggles under a more broadly-based cross-sectorial front remains one of the main stumbling blocks to the emergence of a strong revolutionary force”⁵⁹⁹.

Especially the labour protests, together with the economic demands of the disenfranchised, very well summarised by the demands for more “Social Justice”, appeared to be perceived by many activists, with the exception of a few critical voices, for example some supporters of the Revolutionary Socialists (RS) and 6 April Youth Movement, as completely separate from the larger political struggle. “The failure to see labour strikes and citizens’ protests that are in favour of economic interests as truly political is a major analytical misjudgment”⁶⁰⁰.

As a matter of fact, economic and political demands were inseparable. This point appeared to be clear to those generals who supported Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s 2013 military coup and his purported Neo-Nasserist political discourse, imbued with neo-liberal economy policies, and crony and state capitalism.

Thus, first of all, economic and political demands were considered as distinct issues. As Abdelrahman explained, “new social movements are often middle-class in character, not necessarily progressive or reactionary”⁶⁰¹. Secondly, the rural-urban divide was very difficult to overcome, as I showed in the case study of Mahalla al-Kubra. “Egypt’s rural protests could have been taking place on another planet”⁶⁰². Thirdly, the oppositionists were not structured and organised enough. Thus, they were unable to react to a growing state repression of activities in civil society.

Moreover, during the 2011 uprisings, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) did not act as a revolutionary force, as their “forerunners

⁵⁹⁹ Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt’s Long Revolution*, p. 117.

⁶⁰⁰ Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt’s Long Revolution*, p. 119.

⁶⁰¹ Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt’s Long Revolution*, p. 122.

⁶⁰² Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt’s Long Revolution*, p. 122.

resorted to in 1952 to reconfigure the regime”⁶⁰³. They briefly sided with the demonstrators during the 18 days of occupation of Tahrir Square. As Kandil explained, this happened especially because the Ministry of Interior and Mubarak’s cliques were increasingly detrimental to the army’s interests. “The menace represented by today’s Interior Ministry was further enhanced by the fact that police officers had become too closely wedded to public officials, businessmen and petty criminals to go down without stirring intolerable havoc”⁶⁰⁴.

However, in the aftermath of the uprisings, the military junta did not find any reasonable alliance within the secular front for a coherent democratic transition. “The absence of a reliable revolutionary vanguard that credibly represents the demands of the uprising and is capable of controlling the street has added to SCAF’s fear that if the dam of autocracy is broken a sea of angry people will flood the country”⁶⁰⁵.

Thus the military went back to its traditional cooperation with the Ministry of Interior and the so-called “Deep State”, trying to delegate the control of the security apparatus to a civilian authority, becoming the “avowed leader of the counterrevolution”⁶⁰⁶. Despite limited purges, the police aimed to regain their privileges “creating a rift between the people and the army”⁶⁰⁷. In other words, as explained by Kandil, the security apparatus instigated the army to liquidate the revolutionary camp, by controlling a political elite reliant on the security apparatus, with even harsher methods compared to those of Mubarak’s time.

Popular Committees: a Comparison between Egypt and Syria

The demise of the regime of Hosni Mubarak and the civil war in Syria enabled many Egyptians and Syrians to be involved in “nascent grassroots structures in spaces where state institutions no longer functioned”⁶⁰⁸. For this reason, I focused my attention on non-state actors in order to analyze the micro-dynamics of mobilisation and demobilisation

⁶⁰³ Kandil, H. *Soldiers, Spies, and Statesmen*, p. 231.

⁶⁰⁴ Kandil, H. *Soldiers, Spies, and Statesmen*, p. 233.

⁶⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁶ Kandil, H. *Soldiers, Spies, and Statesmen*, p. 234.

⁶⁰⁷ Kandil, H. *Soldiers, Spies, and Statesmen*, p. 237.

⁶⁰⁸ El-Meehy, A. 'Governance from Below'.

in the Cairo urban and peripheral spaces between the Egyptian 2011 uprisings and the 2013 military coup. In order to add fresh insight concerning the development of Popular Committees in local urban neighbourhoods, I took a long view of their development and considered a wider gamut of political attitudes and beliefs that participants manifested. I later compared the processes of mobilisation and demobilisation of the Egyptian Popular Committees in the Cairo urban district of Sayeda Zeinab with the grassroots' mobilisation in the Northern Syrian's town of Kobane between 2011 and 2016.

As el-Meehy argues, Popular Committees both in Egypt and Syria "represented unique developments against the Arab region's backdrop of long-centralised states with hegemonic control over civil society. Their emergence carried implications for the de facto exercise of power on the ground, as well as future dynamics between localities and the central government"⁶⁰⁹. And a response to widespread liberalisation policies: "as states withdrew from their developmental responsibilities, informality grew and the process of socioeconomic expulsion increasingly affected the middle classes"⁶¹⁰.

Thus, with the emergence of the 2011 uprisings, the Popular Committees in Egypt aimed to self-manage their neighbourhoods, settle disputes and provide security. In Syria as well, local committees were established as "bottom-up institutions aimed at stabilising society": "activists turned their focus to responding to the needs of the population in opposition-held areas"⁶¹¹.

In other words, Popular Committees in Egypt and Syria challenged the traditional patterns of state control over civil society. The 2011-2013 mass riots were paramount in the formation of new means of popular mobilisation, triggered by the participation in alternative networks enhancing a diverse range of unmet services and motivating ordinary citizens to participate in the electoral process.

Especially, in Syria, the formation of Popular Committees in parallel with a growing participation of the masses was not a new phenomenon in the modern history of the country but rooted in a trajectory of enhanced

⁶⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶¹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹¹ *Ibid.*

engagement of the urban notables on providing alternative and horizontal networks of local governance.

Thus, Popular Committees in Egypt and Syria can be considered mainly as a “rupture” with the past forms of grassroots’ participation, although in many cases they acted in continuity with certain forms of local voluntary involvement within existing political groups (e.g. Muslim Brotherhood and *Salafi* controlled committees).

Although the Popular Committees were very diverse in nature⁶¹², they generally worked against the arbitrary methods of the police and as service providers⁶¹³. Later on, the participants within the Popular Committees aspired to have some influence on local public officials. Thus, they appeared to be willing to form more structured organisations⁶¹⁴.

Especially in Syria, while the armed conflict escalated, local councils have assumed “coordination of civil defence, education, health, and development projects, in addition to the extension of resource-intensive services like water, electricity and waste collection. To a lesser extent, they have also been directly involved in restoring infrastructure, as well as extending relief to the local communities, which are areas where nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and charity organisations became dominant players”⁶¹⁵.

The Egyptian Popular Committees were a spontaneous response to the absence of police. They gradually evolved into organising checkpoints and acting as service providers, initially to secure all the intersections between the main roads and internal alleyways, by using informal methods of resistance and networks of trust. In a later stage, when the state apparatuses went back to their usual functions of service providers, the Egyptian Popular Committees were generally perceived as a challenge to the state institutions and were eventually dismantled.

The members of the Syrian local councils often belonged to the local social elites. According to el-Meehy, their “selection or election is made by informal so-called *’lijan al-sharaf’* (honor committees) consisting of

⁶¹² Abu-Lughod, L. 'Living the 'revolution' in an Egyptian village: Moral action in a national space', *American Ethnologist* 39 (1), (2012), pp. 21–25.

⁶¹³ Hassan, H. 'Extraordinary politics of ordinary people', p. 384.

⁶¹⁴ El-Meehy, 'Egypt's popular committees'.

⁶¹⁵ El-Meehy, A. 'Governance from Below'.

local notables and dominant families”⁶¹⁶. Thus, el-Meehy argues that “as a result of their recruitment dynamics, bottom-up local governance remained, to a large extent, exclusionary”.

This is not the case of Northern Syria where a more inclusive dynamic has been shown by the participants in our focus group. For instance, in the initial stage of participation, the involved activists described forms of collective deliberation within the local Committees. In the Kobane urban district, liberated from ISIS in 2015, the oppositional forces evolved into structured and professional fighting units (YPG/YPJ), with a training period for new recruits, a hierarchy and a noticeable engagement of women. In particular, the female fighters (YPJ) appeared to be a key element of this defence force for the provision of internal security, and essential for a better integration between men and women fighters, and to limit ethnic tensions, as well as to advance sexual equality.

However, here as well it was evident that the Democratic Union Party (PYD) was engaged in completely controlling the dynamics of participation and social inclusion within the nascent structure of power. In Northern Syria, the Popular Committees have been integrated in the power structure of the PYD, contributing to the creation of a new military wing engaged in an armed struggle against the regime and the jihadist fighters, and finally serving as political and military providers in order to defend the territory and the internal security from attacks by the Islamic State (ISIS).

At the moment of writing, some of the fighters appeared to be willing to go back to their civilian volunteer activities, after years of armed struggle. The availability of weapons, seized from the regime or provided from abroad since 2014, noticeably changed the nature of those groups, motivating many young people to join the defence force as professional soldiers. Thus, in Northern Syria those social proto-movements evolved into paramilitary organisations. This process determined a stronger level of hierarchical organisation and the still ongoing institutionalisation of daily practices both at the military and civilian levels.

Finally, it can be argued that the grassroots' mobilisations in Egypt and Syria shared many commonalities. Hitherto, those bottom-ups proto-movements have not been studied enough by scholars engaged in

⁶¹⁶ *Ibid.*

researchs focused on the 2011 uprisings. If some of them worked on the Popular Committees grown in both countries, still very few scholars focused their studies on a comparative perspective. Thus, one of the most important results of this book has been to show that those horizontal grassroots' mobilisations in Syria and Egypt are very similar. They might have represented a long-term challenge to collapsing state institutions if they would have been not banned (Egypt) or evolved in an armed struggle (Syria). As I have done in this book, if those original experiments are studied in their initial stages and in reference to their ability to work for a better local governance, the Popular Committees both in Egypt and Syria might be considered as promising political laboratories, led by non-state and civil society actors, the most accredited forms of political participation that might create structured and modern cross-class and cross-ideological coalitions able to better represent genuine but structured bottom-up demands in case of future mobilisations in the region.

The “Leftwing Awakening”

Leftist activists in the MENA region forged or reinvigorated four unprecedented workers' proto-movements, established trade unions or political parties as an effect of the 2011 uprisings: the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) in Egypt; the Union Général Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT) in Tunisia; the People's Democratic Party (HDP) in Turkey; and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria. Thus, in my case studies, I argued that those have been the most relevant outcomes of the recent grassroots' mobilisations, despite the prominent mainstream relevance given to moderate or radical Islamists groups, proto-movements or political parties.

This happened because the 2011 uprisings took place in a context where the disenfranchised and the working classes were especially significant and long neglected by formal politics. In other words, in 2011, those classes begun to be more structured and organised in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria and Turkey. However, despite their popularity, they often have not been well integrated in the urban proto-movements (Egypt and Syria) or in traditional parliamentary politics (Turkey and Tunisia).

This approach is especially relevant if we compare the mobilisations taking place in 2011 in the MENA countries to the major recent unrest witnessed worldwide. For example, as della Porta argues in her

comparison of the 1989 democratic transitions in Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Egyptian and Tunisian 2011 uprisings, workers' social movements appeared more developed in the MENA countries than in Eastern Europe. Even if in North Africa and the Middle East, the political opposition was generally more repressed by the state, there was a stronger organisation of the workers compared to Eastern Europe. As della Porta states in this instance,

Social movement organisations as well as protest appear as better developed in the MENA region than in Eastern Europe. Even if repression was more brutal in the former than in the latter, a longer process of (even if interrupted) liberalisation had allowed for the growth of semi-autonomous spaces [...] A main difference also emerged in terms of social actors who mobilised. In Eastern Europe there was frustration at the declining economic performance and unfulfilled promises of economic growth. In the MENA region, market liberalisation had been met with intense – and often violent – protests. In particular, while in Eastern Europe the coalition was built around human rights organisations that evolved in connection with various types of new social movements, in the MENA region (especially in Egypt) the unions and professional organisations played a more pivotal role. Even though in all cases workers participated in the eventful democratisation, their presence took on more organised forms in the MENA region⁶¹⁷.

As for the Egyptian workers' proto-movements, I argued that they appeared to be too fragmented, leaderless and lacking coherent ideology. However, in comparison with the period before the uprisings, the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) seemed to tackle the demands for workers' rights with a more independent approach from the government's economic policies. However, the trade unions within the EFITU, as well as other independent trade unions umbrellas, have never been clearly legalised by the Egyptian authorities. They have been often used by the state security agencies to control the mobilised workers.

In Tunisia, the workers' proto-movements succeeded. This happened especially due to a more compliant political attitude showed by the UGTT, Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail. The role of the UGTT might have been one of the most important factors that gave the chance in Tunisia for the emergence of a more inclusive coalition compared to other countries. Thus, the UGTT represented the “heart of the coordination between the

⁶¹⁷ Della Porta, D. *Mobilizing for Democracy*, pp. 107-108.

diverse actors of the protests”⁶¹⁸. Compared to the governmental trade unions in Egypt, the UGTT in Tunisia gained autonomy from the state. It was vital in mobilising the proto-movements, especially in peripheral areas, and essential for the formation of a comprehensive coalition that had as its first objective a comprehensive democratic transition. However, at the time of writing, even if the UGTT has been more effectively involved in the Tunisia transition process towards a more democratic political system, this process still failed to advance an effective representation of labour' rights.

The political involvement in Turkish party politics and parliament of the HDP is another good example of a recent left-wing social movement in the region, which grew in the aftermath of popular uprisings (the 2013 Gezi Park movement). Thus, the grassroots' mobilisations in Turkey had as one of the most significant outcomes the strengthening of the pro-Kurdish Left communalist party (HDP). In other words, here, despite state repression, the grassroots' mobilisations had enough time to organise and structure their opposition to the traditional party political system and channel the grassroots' grievances into an effective political party with a notable constituency but a limited political impact.

The same did happen in Northern Syria where the left-wing Democratic Union Party (PYD) emerged as the most important political group to lead the transition process in this region thanks to the support given by the YPG/YPJ militias. These fighting units are evolving into more comprehensive forms of paramilitary groups, respectful of gender and ethnic minorities (SDF, the Syrian Democratic Forces). “We are fighting and we are dying for the freedom of this land. We will continue to resist”. Those are the last words of Viyan Qamishlo, a young YPJ fighter, killed in Manbjî in September 2016, during the clashes between the Syrian Kurds and ISIS. However, at the moment of writing, the revolutionary dream of an autonomous Rojava in Northern Syria has again been significantly challenged by the advance of the Turkish army, which has militarily occupied Afrin, undermining the territorial continuity of Rojava and the announced withdrawal of the US soldiers based in Northern Syria.

To conclude, in more general terms, in this book, I argued that the 2011 uprisings in the MENA region showed a certain incompatibility between

⁶¹⁸ Bozonnet, C. 'Le syndicat UGTT'.

Political Islam and the Left. This happened at least in three of our case studies: in Egypt between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Left, in Turkey and Northern Syria with the repression of the HDP, the PKK and the PYD, carried out especially after the 2016 failed military coup by the Turkish authorities.

Conclusion

Eight years after the 2011 uprisings in the Middle East, the space for social and political changes has narrowed because of strengthened military regimes and ongoing civil wars. The electoral victory of President Donald Trump in the United States reinvigorated a populist and xenophobic discourse, reproducing the same kind of fear and mistrust, justified by anti-terrorism rhetorical policies, witnessed in Russia and in other MENA countries. In this context, in Egypt and Syria, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Bashar al-Assad consolidated their power; while in Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, reduced the space for political dissent.

This book has been especially focused on the Egyptian case. Here “the neoliberal order institutionalised under Mubarak has remained untouched in the years that have followed his ousting”⁶¹⁹. The Egyptian authorities are currently engaged in negotiating the third tranche of a loan with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that determined new privatisations and cuts. After months of talks, on September 9, 2016, the Egyptian authorities received a first tranche of \$1 billion from the total \$12 billion loan, promised to Cairo by the IMF. The second tranche was provided in February 2017. The IMF’s demands concern the privatisation of banks and state-owned enterprises (including the oil and electricity sectors) for a total of 49% of the domestic market (against the 20% promised by Cairo), together with a greater degree of flexibility in the market for changes that could result in the devaluation of the Egyptian pound (from EGP 8.78 per dollar to EGP 12.90 per dollar)⁶²⁰.

The reforms needed to obtain the IMF loan materialised firstly with the law on public sector employment, approved by the Egyptian Parliament on July 26, 2016, which also provided for the introduction of a value-

⁶¹⁹ Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt's Long Revolution*, p. 128.

⁶²⁰ Accocnia, G. 'Gas in the Middle of Mediterranean', *Abo*, 2016. Available at https://www.abo.net/en_IT/topics/accocnia-lng-mediterranean.shtml. Last time accessed on 10 October 2016.

added tax (VAT) that should result in increased revenues arising from the possible growth in public consumption. On August 12, 2016, hundreds of textile company workers, entrepreneurs and operators demonstrated against the government's fiscal policies. According to the participants in the protests, the new measures are causing an increase in prices of raw materials, which would lead to the closure of many factories in the industry.

In order to suppress these new, limited movements, the Egyptian police returned to their customary practices, with reported cases of hundreds of enforced disappearances and instances of arbitrary violence. One of the most ignominious cases has been the murder and torture of the Italian PhD student, Giulio Regeni, who disappeared on the fifth anniversary of the 2011 uprisings, and sparked a diplomatic crisis between Egypt and Italy.

Moreover, Mubarak's supporters and the military cliques regained or consolidated their control over Parliament, the Interior Ministry, the security apparatus, pro-regime trade unions, the state bureaucracy, the media, the judiciary and other public institutions. In other words, "finding themselves confronted with an unrelenting revolutionary process, those in power, whether they are the military or the well-entrenched state bureaucracy, have all worked often in unison, to undermine and derail this process"⁶²¹.

NGOs and Egyptian civil society currently are strictly regulated with the result that even the most independent groups are constantly under the surveillance of the security apparatuses. Especially, with the opening of Case 173, where three judges Hisham Abdul Majid, Ahmad Tawab and Khaled Ghamry have been placed under the direct supervision of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, according to local independent journalists. In the framework of Case 173, 41 NGOs, among the most prominent organisations in Egyptian civil society, have been charged, with lacking an official license or receiving foreign funds, including the al-Nadeem Centre, which defends the victims of violence and torture, the Arab Network for Human Rights, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, and the Nazra Centre for Women and Gender Studies. Moreover, the Egyptian office of Amnesty International that has repeatedly accused

⁶²¹ Abdelrahman, M. *Egypt's Long Revolution*, p. 131.

the regime for a permanent detention of at least 60,000 political prisoners has been closed.

There are now dozens cases of lawyers arrested, among them Huda Abdelmonem, Mohamed Abu Horira, and his wife Aisha al-Shater, daughter of the charismatic leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Khairat al-Shater, working for the Egyptian Coordination of Rights and Freedoms (ECRF), whose directors Ezzat Ghoneim and Zaouz Mahgoub disappeared September 14, 2018. All prominent activists, lawyers and bloggers, active during and after the 2011 uprisings, have been detained, among them Amal Fathy, Wael Abbas and Ismail Iskandarani. Finally, there are dozens of artists, included singers and directors, arrested only because they expressed critical opinions about the al-Sisi regime, among them the poet Galal al-Behairy, accused of spreading “fake news” and “insults to the military establishment”.

Moreover, Law 45 on cyber-security strenghtened the control over social networks, bloggers and independent journalists, hindering press freedoms, together with the closure of the Arabic version of *Mada Masr*, and other alternative websites flourished after the 2011 uprisings or foreign media critical towards the regime.

Previous conflicts between pro-Mubarak and pro-Sisi elites, which is often emphasised by mainstream researchers, has been reconciled by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Despite the low popular participation in the 2018 presidential elections, al-Sisi has stronger control over military and state institutions even compared to the Mubarak, and al-Sisi appears to be less vulnerable to internal conspiracies or grassroots’ protests than his predecessors. However, his abilities to rid the country of “terrorism”, “eliminate” the Muslim Brotherhood, provide “stability” and economic recovery are yet to be proven.

On the one hand, the Muslim Brotherhood appeared to be willing, despite fraught discussions between older and younger members within the present-day clandestine movement, to forge again an unofficial settlement with the regime for its own survival, and thus the continued existence of its charities and the defence of its financial interests. On the other hand, younger and older activists from the mobilisations of Tahrir Square are now discussing new forms of political action, to a certain extent already practiced, but still weak and dispersed, within university campuses and factories, against the arbitrary practices of the police or gathering around single issues (such as the repression of the independent

press or the promised transfer of the two islands of Tiran and Sanafir to Saudi Arabia), with the aim of finding common ground for future, possibly united and nationwide, waves of protests in the name of “Social Justice”.

Questions might be raised in further studies as to whether the collective actions that took place in Egypt between 2011 and 2013 changed the nature of the diverse opposition groups which demanded greater democratic participation during the occupations of Tahrir Square, and thus in the future will allow for more coordination among the different strands of the Egyptian proto-movements and the formation of more structured cross-ideological and cross-class coalitions. Although a possible answer might be that the nature of those groups remained generally unchanged after the uprisings, new mobilisations from below based on the spirit of the 2011 revolts might revitalise the working class and youth's attempts to fight for more justice and less state violence.

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Case 1

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- Interviewee 6: Moataz, member of a Sayeda Zeinab Popular Committee, Cairo, 2011-2015.
- Interviewee 7: Mustafa, member of a Sayeda Zeinab Popular Committee, Cairo, 2011-2015.

Case 2

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- Interviewee 4: Garib, retired worker, Mahalla al-Kubra, 2011-2015.
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- Interviewee 6: Mahrouf, farmer, Mahalla al-Kubra, 2011-2015.
- Interviewee 7: Hemad, farmer, Mahalla al-Kubra, 2011-2015.
- Interviewee 8: Walid, worker Ghazal al-Mahalla, Mahalla al-Kubra, 2011-2015.
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Case 3

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