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Commentary

The Effect of Anti-Terrorism and Social Movements in Egypt

Saerom Han[1]

The return of another military general to the highest political office in Egypt surprised many observers. This was not due to the army once again assuming governmental responsibilities, but because of the role of civil society as a locomotive in justifying what happened as the will of the people. Even some independent labour organizations, one of the most vigorous social forces before and after the Uprising, outspokenly supported the idea that the Egyptian military should intervene in political conflicts between the Muslim Brotherhood and its opposition groups. Not only in Egypt, but also in other Arab countries except Tunisia, the current circumstances seem to show elites-led counter-revolution and powerless civil society.

Following a dramatic and massive mobilization of Egyptian people in 2011, which ended over thirty years of dictatorship, and another mobilization supporting the return of the army in 2013, it might be tempting to return to the idea of Middle Eastern exceptionalism, which neglects many aspects of the current state-society relations in the Arab world and the history of other developing states. If we wish to avoid consequentialist conclusions and understand why things are happening in the Arab world, a better approach would be to recognize seemingly random patterns of conflict in Arab states as continuous, but not linear, processes. Looking into relatively similar cases in the history of developing countries in other regions can also help us avoid becoming trapped in the exceptionalism.

The purpose of this article is to explain the current relationship between state and society in Egypt, focusing specifically on labour politics. Workers' organizing capacity and their potential impact on the domestic politics and economy have played a decisive role in transitional periods in many developed and developing states. In addition to this, the importance of labour politics in the current transition in Egypt stems from the assumption that while the Egyptian workers are contingent democrats, intensified structural contradictions under authoritarianism and escalating suppression provide a ground on which workers' demands go beyond material interests. This, in turn, makes it possible for different social groups to join forces in favour of political and social rights, which becomes a direct threat to the authoritarian regime. Also, this article attempts to explain the labour politics in Egypt by employing Gramsci's concept of hegemony with a cursory observation of the case of South Korea from the 1960s to 1980s. In doing so, this article argues that the hegemonic position of the current authoritarian regime in Egypt is vulnerable due to its reliance on repression, and this imbalance between coercion and consent creates the potential of rebuilding solidarities among various social groups against the regime.

Consolidating Hegemony through Coercion and Consent

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The Gramscian approach of hegemony stresses the role of material power, and more importantly the importance of knowledge and ideas in the process of power struggles. According to Gramsci, hegemony is more than a material condition of power. Rather, cultural and ideological dominance is the decisive element of hegemony. This is because the consolidation of hegemony necessitates not only coercion, but also consent (Moore 2007). When a given society experiences hegemonic struggles, elites seek to recapture hegemonic position through the infusion of a set of ideologies into the society, leading the public to voluntarily participate in protecting the established worldview and reproduce it through daily life (Jones 2006). This political process is what Gramsci labelled "passive revolution", and this passive revolution can function as one of the main political strategies of elites to curb resistance from the bottom up (Gramsci et al. 1972). From Gramsci's interpretation of hegemony, it can be inferred that a ruling hegemony is likely to be fragile when the elements of consent do not work properly, or when the balance between coercion and consent excessively leans toward coercion.

Although detailed comparison between political transitions in Egypt and South Korea is beyond the purpose of this article, it is worthwhile pointing out that both cases are useful in understanding how the Gramscian conceptions of coercion and consent set in motion during political transitions where authoritarian regimes face political crisis and grassroots resistance. Hee Yeon Cho is one of the scholars who applied the concept of passive revolution in his analysis of the role of anti-communism in controlling democratic movements in South Korea[1]. According to Cho, the military regime in South Korea used 'anti-communist regimentation' to repress political dissidents and stabilize its rule (Cho 1998). Labour rights violations and strong state surveillance were justified through the infusion of anti-communist ideology into Korean society, which led the middle class and even workers themselves to recognize voluntarily that labour strikes and political resistance to the government are pro-communist activities. Hagen Koo also explains how the workers' movement, particularly from 1948 to 1960, was suffocated by the "hysterical anti-communist atmosphere" (Koo 1993). For the authoritarian regimes workers' movements were one of security concerns, and anti-communist ideology was taken as a useful method to suppress the political and social demands of workers as well as to prevent solidarities between workers and other political activists. The influence of anti-communist ideology was not a unique feature in Korean society. Rather, its influence could be felt in the United States as well as its allies such as West Germany and Japan during the Cold War. However, anti-communism in South Korea was distinctive not only in terms of its usage of the military regime in justifying systematic repression of political dissidents, but also in the way that Korean society voluntarily accepted anti-communism discourse and participated in reproducing it. Under the umbrella of anti-communism, coercion was articulated with the direct application of state repression, while it was due to the dimension of consent in Korean culture that enabled the state to protect itself from protests[2].

Gramsci's conceptions of hegemonic struggles and passive revolution have been often applied to the relationship between the ruling elites and civil society in Egypt (De Smet 2015; Pratt 2001; El-Mahdi 2011). Even though their highlighting points vary, there has been some common understanding among the scholarship, which is that the Egyptian regime has more or less successfully controlled the civil society on the base of global neoliberalism order, strong repression and leading ideologies such as Arab nationalism and anti-colonialism. For those who follow the Gramscian approach, de/mobilization against the authoritarian regime in Egypt is essentially a natural phenomenon because there are always the revolutionaries on the one hand that continuously attempt to overthrow the dominant economic and political system, and on the other hand the ruling elites that diligently undermine those revolutionaries and consolidate their dominance through coercion and consent. There have been not many cases, however, that link this logic of hegemonic struggles in Egypt to counterterrorism, one of the most controversial tools of the Egyptian regime today.

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The War on Terrorism and Political Transition in Egypt

Anti-terrorism is not a product of the Arab Uprising of 2011. Rather it is an extension of the ideological domination through which successive authoritarian regimes have justified the sacrifice of political and social rights of their people. For instance, it was state-led developmentalism and Arab nationalism under the Nasser regime, which reversed the development of autonomous civil society. Furthermore, arresting political dissidents under the label of terrorists has been often used under the Mubarak regime. However, given the systematic instrumentalization of anti-terrorism, the role of external motive power, (notably international cooperation to fight against IS and affiliated groups), as well as its impacts on grassroots movements, it could be a major influence on Egypt's transitional trajectory for some years to come.

In mid-August 2015, President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi ratified the notorious counter-terrorism laws, which sparked fierce criticism inside and outside Egypt. Given the vague definition of terrorists and ruthless punishments which awaited those accused of being terrorists, local and international human rights organizations, the Journalists Syndicate and other political activists in Egypt strongly condemned this law of giving de facto discretionary authority to the regime and prosecutors to judge and punish any person or group's activities. Indeed, the ratification of the counterterrorism laws provided a legal ground on which the government suppression of strikes, demonstrations, and other political dissent can be justified.

However, it is worthwhile pointing out that political quiescence of civil society organizations and demobilization had been witnessed even before the new counterterrorism law was approved. For instance, the Egyptian labour movement shows its dramatic decline in its activities after the army's removal of the former President Mohammed Morsi in June 2013. While approximately 250 labour protests occurred during the month of June in 2013, from July the number of monthly protests have been less then fifty, which suggests that significant changes occurred within the labour movements itself and the domestic political environment (Ramadan & Adly 2015). Some insist that the sudden decrease in labour protests indicates that workers had an extraordinarily large number of protests because of their outrage over the Morsi regime, which was considered unfavourable to workers. This argument fails to appreciate the fact that the labour movement in Egypt had continuously increased from the 1990s until the end of the Morsi regime. Growing repression is also another factor that observers and activists have raised as the reason for the inactivity of the labour movement. Yet not only in the Egyptian context, but also in other developing states in general, the role of repression has functioned as two sides of the same coin. State repression often provokes massive mobilizations, as it did during the 18 days of the Uprising in Egypt. While it is not saying that repression has not affected grassroots mobilizations, questioning about the direct impacts of repression makes able us to look into another important aspect of state control strategies, the ideological domination of the Egyptian society through which people recognize physical repression as the biggest obstacle that they cannot overcome despite their very empirical evidence that people's will and power is far stronger than any authoritarian regime. Seemingly inherent linkage between repression and political quiescence is refracted by continuous hegemonic struggles between rulers and ruled, and consent plays a decisive role in consolidating hegemony.

In this sense, it is necessary to distinguish the elements of consent from that of coercion under the slogan of counterterrorism in order to understand the dynamic of the labour movement and its relation to state policies. Although these two aspects of anti-terrorist policies are closely related, the dimension of consent can be analytically distinguished from that of coercion such as arrests, torture, or layoffs. A close observation based on the distinction between coercion and consent reveals that the state's anti-terrorist strategy was more successful in controlling the labour movement when it was mainly reflected in the form of a leading discourse within Egyptian society. Even before the removal of Morsi, the military systematically deployed

local media, as well as governmental and other affiliated institutions, to manipulate civil society in the name of the "war on terrorism". It was not surprising at all when Abdel Fattah Ibrahim, the formal President of the state-controlled Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), strongly supported the anti-terrorism campaign led by the interim government in 2013 (El-Misr 2013). The ETUF has frequently condemned independent labour movements as illegal, terrorists affiliated protests. It was unexpected, however, that even some independent labour organizations, which have been known as grassroots groups with a desire for democratic transformation, agreed on and participated in the counterterrorism drive. In January 2015, Bassem Halqa (Personal communication, 2, February 2015), secretary general of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU), noted that Egypt was facing a precarious moment due to terrorist attacks, and workers had to wait until the current government restored order and developed the economy. A number of workers also expressed similar concerns about terrorism, justifying their distrust of labour movements.

Constructed Division

Internal division within the social movement organizations has been repeatedly raised as one of the main reasons for political quiescence of civil society since the Uprising. Given the active role of social mobilizations such as that of workers, students, and other political activists in achieving regime change in 2011, observers and even activists themselves now ask about what happened to them and where they are. For instance, the two famous independent labour federations, EFITU and the Egyptian Democratic Labour Confederation (EDLC), are being criticized for failing to mobilize their members. Hoda Kamel and Mustafa Bassiouny, one of the former board members of EFITU and an analyst of workers' movements respectively, note that these federations are divided and "unable to build solid labour structures, to organize general strikes or to mobilize on the national level" (Charbel 2015). Most academic literature on political and social transitions as well as social movements in Egypt reflect this reality, and frequently argues that the lack of organizing capacity within social movement groups and internal splits are among the main reasons for the failure of vigorous struggles against the current authoritarian regime (De Smet 2015; Beinin & Vairel 2013; Alexander & Bassiouny 2014).

It is, however, misleading to conclude that internal divisions (such as economic rights versus political rights, and leftists versus Islamists) are an inherent part of Egyptian political nature. Rather, this chronic division has been continuously *constructed* by the authoritarian regimes since the era of the Nasser regime, and it is the effects of anti-terrorism discourse combined with other slogan such as 'economic development first' through which the current regime weakens solidarities within civil society. The Bread Riot of 1977 demonstrates how the Sadat regime presented this explosion of anger as communist activity, describing it as a "theives' protest" agitated by communists. It was right after this massive mobilization that Sadat repealed Nasser's decision to illegalize the Muslim Brotherhood and encouraged its political activities in such a way that the Muslim Brotherhood could be deployed in weakening socialist influence (Montaser 2013).

After 2011 Uprising, disagreements between and within revolutionary movements were most noticeable when the formal Gen. Sisi asked Egyptians to show their will and solidarity to fight against terrorism through holding a massive protest. It was the army's clamorous anti-terrorism campaign, which began in earnest to sweep Egypt right after the removal of Morsi. Only marginalized voices within the workers' movement called for workers not to join the army's anti-terrorism campaign, and the majority of EFITU's executive committee decided to join and support the protest against terrorism. It was an explicit signal of loyalty to the returned army at the expense of hitherto triumphs that grassroots workers had achieved and political and social rights hereafter (Ramadan 2013). The April 6 youth movement, which had a strong

connection to the workers' movement, and some other political organizations rejected the participation in this anti-terrorism campaign, arguing that it may presuppose suppressing basic freedom expression. Fatma Ramadan (Personal communication, 18, February 2016), board member of the EFITU, argues that the history of division and the lack of solidarities among different civil organizations reveal how the successive regimes have been keen to isolate each of social movement groups, so that they could not be a direct threat to the regimes.

Fragile Authoritarian Hegemony

As mentioned above, the role of consent is critical in consolidating the hegemonic position of rulers. When the balance between coercion and consent leans toward coercion, especially under authoritarian regimes, it naturally creates unintended opportunities to grassroots movement in terms of changing tactics and increasing the potential of solidarities. First, growing repression shifts the form of social movements from disruptive to non-disruptive, allowing movement organizations to continue to "develop discourse and organizational resources" (Chang 2015). Also, indiscriminate repression tends to facilitate coalitions between different social groups in terms of their interests and ideologies because the state becomes an enemy of more than one sector in society (Van Dyke 2003). In South Korea, it was not the role of political elites nor relaxed government repression that ended the so called 'dark era' of democratic movements in the 1960s. Rather, it was the increasing level of state repression and following the subsequent tactical innovations, as well as the continuous efforts of different social groups to produce solidarities, that were decisive in opening historical moments toward civil emancipation in the 1970s and 1980s. Coalitions between students, workers and intellectuals were not established on the base of favourable environment, and mutual distrust was not a small barrier that people who had different backgrounds and interests could overcome. For workers whose demands had been focused on their narrow interests, escalating repression provided a ground on which they went over their material demands and began to fight for their dignity and rights, leading to solidarities with other social and political groups (Chang 2015).

In Egypt, too, the relatively stable position of the new authoritarian regime began to unravel with its indiscriminate repression on the labour movement and other sectors in the society. The restrictive anti-protests laws in 2013 and the counterterrorism laws in 2015 as well as today's infamous forced disappearances are unintentionally providing opportunities for different social groups to create a new culture of resistance with various means and rebuild solidarities. Ramadan (Personal communication, 18, February 2016) notes that even though the initiatives for solidarities are yet at the incipient level, there are on-going attempts to unite various civil organizations, labour unions and political activists. A remarkable protest in downtown Cairo in 12 February in 2016, which was led by the Doctors' Syndicate to protest police abuse, represents the ongoing effort to debilitate the current regime's draconian regulations imposed on the Egyptian society. Thousands of doctors demanded transparent prosecution of the police officers who were involved in the recent attack on the doctors in Matariya hospital, the end of police intimidation, and the resignation of the health minister in downtown Cairo, where public mobilizations except pro-Sisi movements have been exhaustively prohibited. Workers, activists and different syndicates' representatives expressed their solidarity with the Doctors' movement, recognizing the February 12 event as a moment of the unified struggle against authoritarianism. Not only this event, but there are also other occasions in which political and civil organizations try to cooperate, (such as in the campaign to demand the release of missing or arrested civilians and at protests and conferences to reject the newly proposed Civil Service Law), which was one of the biggest street actions since June 2013.

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[1] Research on political transition in South Korea has mainly focused on its dramatic economic development and its relations to democratization, rather than its democratic struggles during over 40 years of the military regimes from the 1950s to 1980s. While this was partly the result of the legacy of anti-communism within Korean society, downplaying Korean democratic movements under authoritarianism has also been found internationally. For details, see (Moore 2007)

[2] According to Nam, the dimension of coercion can be explained through institutionalization of the National Security Law (NSL), the Anti-Communist Law (ACL) and the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA). The NSL and the ACL, which were established in 1948 and 1961 respectively, were applied broadly to those who that the government considered threats. In 1948, for instance, 118,621 individuals were arrested or placed in the custody of violating the NSL, and 132 political parties and social groups were dissolved. The number of those who were arrested for violating the NSL and ACL was 6,735 from the 1961 to 1980. Established in May 16, 1961, the KCIA was called "Korea above Korea", and its main functions were monitoring dissidents including students and their networks. Meanwhile, the dimension of consent was achieved via various methods, such as media, the educational system and other cultural tools. For instance, since the 1960s, all textbooks were revised to reflect the war on communism and all students in elementary, middle and high schools had to take a separated "Anti-communist ethics".