The Movement in Egypt: A Dialogue with Samir Amin

Wang Hui, Wen Tiejun, and Lau Kin Chi

Setting

The World Social Forum was convened on February 6–11, 2011, in Dakar, Senegal. This coincided with the climax of the sociopolitical movement in Egypt confronting the Mubarak dictatorship. We conducted a series of discussions in Dakar, and later by phone, and by a further interview on May 16–20, in Zagreb, Croatia, with Professor Samir Amin, renowned theorist and activist born in Egypt.

Participants

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The Egyptian Revolution Is Not a Color Revolution

Wang Hui: We are all very concerned with what is happening in Egypt. The mainstream mass media in many countries compare what is happening in Tunisia and Egypt to the color revolutions in Central Asia two decades ago. Such a comparison confuses some significant differences between the two. My intuition is that the revolution unfolding in Egypt is different from the color revolutions that were pro-West and procapitalism, taking place after the disintegration of the USSR. The current massive democratic movement inevitably embeds a protest against the global hegemony of the United States.

Samir Amin: Egypt is a cornerstone in the US plan to control the planet. Washington will not tolerate any attempt of Egypt to move out of its total submission. This is the exclusive goal of Washington in its involvement in the organization of a "soft transition." The plan of the ruling system is to make minimal concessions in order to safeguard the essentials of the system. Neoliberal capitalist integration into the global system is at the root of all these social devastations, and simultaneously aligned with US policy in the world and the region, a policy that means de facto allowing Israel to continue the devastation in occupied Palestine. What Obama means by "smooth transition" is a transition that would lead to no change, only some minor concessions, such as the removal of Mubarak and his close associates.

What happened on February 12, 2011, was that, firstly, Mubarak had not resigned; he was removed by a coup d'etat of the head of the army, and he and his fellow vice president, Omar Suleiman, were dismissed. The new official leadership of the army claimed that it would hold power until new elections were held, and then the army would go back to the barracks. In the meantime, they would be responsible for the transition.

Lau Kin Chi: The military maneuvered to take power, and you pointed out that this was a coup d'etat. It seems the euphoria of the overthrow

of Mubarak overshadowed this fact. As we would expect, the army would want restoration of order and containment of the mass mobilizations. Right after Mubarak's removal, the army cleared Tahrir Square, arrested protestors that refused to leave the square, kept martial law in place, and endeavored to present an image of return to "normalcy." A period of uncertainty and a tug of war have unfolded. On the one hand, the people have continued with their assemblies in the street, advancing the revolution. Every Friday, we have witnessed huge mobilizations. At the same time, for sure, the reactionary forces are trying everything to turn the tide of the people's revolution, and they never lack the means of power and violence to do so. For them, it is crucial to break the defiance and newly acquired confidence of the masses. We are interested in understanding the balance of forces and the state of organization of the masses.

Samir Amin: I would first discuss the components and the strategies of the movement. There are four components of the opposition. One is the youth. They are politicized young people, more than one million organized, which is not at all a small number. They are against the social and economic system. To claim that they are anticapitalist would be a little theoretical for them, but they are against social injustice and growing inequality. They are nationalist in the good sense; they are anti-imperialist. They hate the submission of Egypt to US hegemony. They are therefore against so-called peace with Israel, which tolerates Israel's continued colonization of occupied Palestine. They are democratic, totally against the dictatorship of the army and the police. They have decentralized leaderships. When they first gave the order to demonstrate, the mobilization was one million. Nevertheless, within a few hours, the actual figure was not one million but fifteen million, everywhere throughout the whole nation, in small towns and villages. They had an immediate, gigantic, positive echo throughout the whole nation. The effect was that fear switched sides.

The second component is the radical left, which comes from the communist tradition. The young are not anticommunist, but they do not want the framework of a party with chiefs and orders. They do not have bad relations with the communists. Absolutely no problem. Thanks to the demonstrations, there is a coming together, not of leadership but of interaction.

Wang Hui: This means that no matter whether it is the youth movement or the communists, their critique of the present regime and their demand for democracy involve not only resistance against US hegemony but also

against the current social, political, and economic system. While the traditional left and the youth movement share some similarities in orientation, they differ with regard to the form of the movement. The contemporary movement does not wish to be constrained in the framework of highly organized institutions, such as political parties. Their rejection of the efforts to represent them in and by various organizations makes this manifest. What does Mohamed ElBaradei represent?

Samir Amin: He represents the third component, the middle-class democrats. The system is so policed and so like the Mafia that many, including small businesspersons, are continuously racketed in order to survive. They are not part of the Left—they accept capitalism, business, and the market; they are not even very anti-American; they do not love Israel, but they accept it. However, they are democrats, against the concentration of power of the army, police, and the gang Mafia. ElBaradei is typical of them. He has no idea of the economy other than what it is—the market. He does not know what socialism is, but he is a democrat. People outside Egypt know him better than those in the country do, but he could correct that quickly. It is not impossible that he would be a partner in the transition. Yet the army and the intelligence forces will not abandon their dominant position in the ruling of the society. Will ElBaradei accept it?

Wang Hui: ElBaradei goes for what we normally call "political democracy," but he has no idea what such political democracy corresponds to in terms of social form, because he fundamentally accepts the existing capitalist system. On the eve of the Iraq War, on the issue of weapons of mass destruction, he had had some tensions with the United States, but he does not offer any alternatives. How about the Muslim Brotherhood? The Western media pay much attention to it.

Samir Amin: The fourth component is the Muslim Brotherhood. Even if they have a public, political, popular echo, they are ultra-reactionary. They have not only religious ideology; they are reactionaries on social grounds. They have been openly against the workers' strikes, standing with the state. They think workers should accept the market. They took a position against the peasants' movement. There is a strong middle peasant movement, menaced by the market, by the rich peasants, and they struggle for the right to maintain their property. The Muslim Brotherhood took a position against them, saying that land property is a private right and that the market is sacrosanct in the Koran.

The Complicity of the Muslim Brotherhood with the Regime

Samir Amin: The Muslim Brotherhood has been in fact complicit with the regime. The regime and the Muslim Brotherhood are in apparent conflict, but, in fact, they cooperate. The state has surrendered to the Muslim Brotherhood three major institutions: education, justice, and state TV; these are very important state institutions. Through education, they have imposed the veil, first for schoolgirls and then for society. Through justice, they introduce Islamic law, shari'a. Through the media, they influence public opinion. The leadership has always been a corrupted political leadership made up of very rich people. The Saudis—which means the Americans—have always financed them. Their support comes from two main sectors. One is the middle class, which is procapitalist, anticommunist, afraid of the people. They think Muslim rule is not a bad thing. They are spontaneously with the Muslim Brotherhood. They are very influential among teachers, medical doctors, et cetera. At the same time, the Muslim Brotherhood has the lumpen support of their paid militias. In Egypt, extreme poverty is large-scale. We have five million totally deprived people in Cairo, out of a population of fifteen million. Among the very poor with very low political understanding, the Muslim Brotherhood has an army that it can mobilize. In case of "success" and "elections," the Muslim Brotherhood will become the major parliamentary force. The United States welcomes this and characterizes the Muslim Brotherhood as "moderate," that is, docile, submissive to US strategy, leaving Israel free to continue its occupation of Palestine. The Muslim Brotherhood is also fully in favor of the ongoing "market" system, which is totally externally dependent. They are also, in fact, partners in the "comprador" ruling class. Billionaires make up the top leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Wang Hui: The Muslim Brotherhood represents a religious political force. According to your analysis, such a religious political force does not provide alternatives for the social or economic system. On the contrary, there is no contradiction between the politicization of religion and the consolidation of the market system. The four elements you mentioned above have different inclinations, characteristics, and backgrounds, but how did they come together?

Samir Amin: What happened is the following. The youth started the movement; the radical left joined immediately, and the bourgeois democrats joined the next day. The Muslim Brotherhood boycotted for the first four

days, because they thought the police would defeat the movement. When they saw that the movement could not be defeated, the Muslim Brotherhood leadership thought they could not stay out, and so they moved in. This fact must be known.

Wang Hui: You said that the US strategy for Egypt very much resembles the US strategy for Pakistan, which is the combination of political Islam and military intelligence. We can also add the globalized capitalist market system. Can such a system support democracy?

Samir Amin: The system is not Mubarak, but the people protesting started with one symbol, which was Mubarak. A few hours after Mubarak nominated Omar Suleiman as vice president, the slogan shouted by the people was "No Mubarak, no Suleiman, they are two Americans." Obama wants a soft transition, which would be something like in the Philippines. The people say they want to get rid of not one criminal but all criminals; they want a real transition not a farce, so there is a very high political consciousness. Yet the US goal is a soft transition. How? By opening negotiations with the Right and the Center, with the Muslim Brotherhood, and eventually some bourgeois democrats, they would isolate the Left and the youth. That is their strategy.

The system is very vicious. It had opened the prison and released seventeen thousand criminals during the Tahrir Square demonstrations, given them pro-Mubarak badges, arms, money, and the guarantee that they would not be returned to prison, in exchange for attacking the demonstrators. These criminals could not have escaped from prison if not without the protection of the police. Nobody from the movement opened the prison.

It is the beginning of a long struggle. Egypt is a country of long revolutions, from 1920 to 1952, with ups and downs. In the long run, the youth and the Left are the majority and have the capacity for action. A bad scenario would be the Muslim Brotherhood attacking them. They have tried.

Lau Kin Chi: In the mainstream media, the status of the Muslim Brotherhood is dubious. The media sometimes portray them as an Islamic threat, but at other times, the media portray the Brotherhood as a victim of the system under Mubarak.

Samir Amin: The army is part of the system, and the Muslim Brotherhood is part of the system. They have been associated since the time of Sadat

and Mubarak. They continue to be associated. They appear dissociated because they have different constituencies; hence, they need to look separate. The strategy of the United States is to maintain the system, with minimal concessions to democracy. Their example could be like the Philippines or Indonesia; you have a change in the leader but not the system. Later, there will be a government with the Muslim Brotherhood and the army. The army has been corrupt; the enormous US aid to Egypt was not to reinforce the military capacity of the army at all but to allow the army to buy off with this money 40 percent of the Egyptian economy. The United States wants to capture the army as its institutional ally. We must take this into account.

The challenge is in front of us. We had a first victory, which is of course very important. But what would be the role of the Muslim Brotherhood? The Muslim Brotherhood is not a democratic organization and cannot be so. It is a top-down military organization. It is a quasi-fascist party, and it has different constituencies. The fact that the Muslim Brotherhood has a hierarchy and a popular audience is something different. That you have a popular audience does not necessarily mean that you are progressive. You have reactionary parties that have a popular audience. That should be very clear. The leaders are multibillionaires funded by Saudi Arabia. The cadres are backward segments of the petty bourgeoisie, mostly religious. The masses are poor chaps, recruited through social activities financed by Saudi Arabia. The militias are lumpen. We should insist on the duplicity of the United States in preparing for the role of the Muslim Brotherhood. The support by the United States and Europe for political Islam is total and absolute, and their fear of the Muslim Brotherhood is only a lie, for internal European consumption. The Muslim Brotherhood is the only strong ally they have to prevent democracy. My first remark is "The West is anti-democracy." They do not want democracy; they know that democracy in such countries in the south is bound to be anti-imperialist, and potentially anticapitalist.

Lau Kin Chi: The danger of the Muslim Brotherhood taking prominence in the new social order is not only economic and political but also social and cultural. When the United States presents itself as distanced from the Muslim Brotherhood for its Islam fundamentalism, it pays lip service to the universalism of liberty and equality. I think the United States is duplicitous in "aiding" the restoration of "order" in Egypt through a tacit tolerance of the Muslim Brotherhood's taking the offensive on the social and religious fronts. It is against the revolutionary potential to break the status quo in the social and cultural life of the people, which is a desire that powers the

upsurge of the masses with their renewed insistence on justice and liberation. Religious minorities, as well as women, would be the first to take a toll. This cultural front is a major challenge to the democratic forces. During the Tahrir Square demonstrations, there were reports of a conscious effort by demonstrators to refuse divisions, that there were many slogans about solidarity between Copts and Muslims, that the Copts stood guard while the Muslims were praying. Deep politics is not institutional democracy and rights, but values and behavior in the everyday practice of relating to each other. I am concerned how the Muslim Brotherhood will consolidate its reactionary politics through sowing divisions that have been culturally latent in society. The way the United States has supported Pakistan with its political Islam and its conservative cultural politics gives us a glimpse into how the United States may relate to the Muslim Brotherhood. In this regard, the defense of the rights of women against the reactionary politics of the Muslim Brotherhood is paramount to the politics of the youth and the communists.

Samir Amin: You are right. Moreover, it is of the utmost importance to denounce the duplicity of the discourse of Obama and the West on "democracy." In fact, the plan of Obama for Egypt, supported by the Gulf countries and the reactionary bloc, which includes the Muslim Brotherhood, is precisely not to allow any democracy in Egypt. This would be too dangerous to their interests. They want Egypt to remain submissive to the pattern of neoliberal globalization and to US-Israeli military control over the region.

The most active forces in the movement, the majority of the youth, are aware of that danger. They have no sympathy for the actions against the Copts and women conducted by so-called Muslim movements. However, the Western media are silent on those issues. They do not want to disturb the plan of Obama! In addition, they continue delivering a "certificate of democracy" to the Muslim Brotherhood, which is the most radical antidemocratic political force since its creation in 1927!

Beyond Street Politics

Lau Kin Chi: The way the media operate is to privilege what is visible. If there are huge gatherings in Tahrir Square, something is happening. Otherwise, it is the mundane daily routines. The challenge for us is to see beyond the street politics. What I have found very inspiring in the Egyptian upsurge is how the spirit of hope and defiance became contagious. There

must have been a lot of fear and uncertainty in the face of possible repression, and each person or community had to deal with that fear and uncertainty personally as well as mutually. This is where the new politics comes in. When the people came out to say "Enough is enough," they overcame fear, because they could see hope beyond the impending repression that could bring death, torture, and "defeat." A Chinese saying goes, "When the people do not fear death, how can the threat of death induce fear?" The instruments for spreading hope against fear include constant exchange, facilitated by physical mass gatherings at Tahrir Square and open spaces throughout the country, and also by the Internet, through Facebook, Twitter, blogs. . . . Many people talk about such use of technology to link and organize, seeing it as different from movement organization and activism in conventional partisan or syndicalist forms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, I feel we should not be counterpoising one form of organization against another. It need not be an either-or choice, because different forms of connecting may carry the potential of facilitating ongoing processes of the constitution of the subject of hope, the subject of revolutionary uprising, that is larger than the privatized self of isolated individuals. Can you tell us more about the strategic and tactical moves by some forces of the revolution at this critical conjuncture to connect and consolidate?

Samir Amin: The movement is the majority of the people. There are millions and millions. They are fully aware of the problems. Every Friday, there have been gigantic mobilizations, each time with more political maturity. They say they do not want a government aligned with the United States. They will continue demonstrating and mobilizing. They will use the marginal freedom of speech now allowed to raise the political awareness of the people. On May 13, we had three hundred thousand people protest the atrocities against the Christians. People know how dangerous this can be. There were two sets of demonstrations. One was Copts and Muslims protesting together for national unity—you know, the flag of the 1920 revolution had the cross and the crescent. The other demonstration on May 13 was the movement to go to the border of Palestine. In Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, people went to the border of Israel. It was a demonstration that showed one important thing. Contrary to what the mainstream media say, it was not a pro-West demonstration but an anti-imperialist demonstration. The demands were anti-imperialist and social, not socialist. Renationalizations, no privatization. United States, out; United States' agreement with Egypt, out. Schools, hospitals, labor, et cetera, in. You did not see one Islamic flag.

Lau Kin Chi: But we also hear reports of many clashes between Muslims and Copts in the mainstream media.

Samir Amin: There are conflicts provoked by small fascist groups of the Muslim Brotherhood, because the state and the police have not changed. The demonstrations for solidarity are many, but these are not reported in the mainstream media. The presentation of a clash between the people is false. There are organized attacks on the Copts by the state and police, with the support of the Muslim Brotherhood, who disguise themselves behind the Salafi movement, the most extreme, which Saudi Arabia protects. They are in conflict with Egyptian Islam, with the Sufis, who are the majority. It is very complicated. Of course, the Egyptian power blocs have always been able to manipulate this.

Lau Kin Chi: How did the demonstrators form the Popular Committees at Tahrir Square? There are very few reports about them in the mainstream media.

Samir Amin: Initially, there was nothing reported in the Western media, on purpose. The Western media want to pretend that people are happy with the transition. The people have applauded the fall of Mubarak. On the other hand, the people of the Popular Committees are too busy. They are well known inside Egypt, though not outside. How did they operate? They sat together for hours and hours to discuss how to proceed. It started very early, around the second or third day of the demonstration. It started not spontaneously, but at Tahrir Square, with a good number of representatives of the three components of the movement. Then they felt there should be similar Popular Committees at different levels.

The agenda has changed. Initially, it was to remove Mubarak and establish the rules for a real transition: first, immediately dissolving the fabricated assembly; second, immediately lifting martial law and allowing free demonstration; third, starting the project of a new constitution; fourth, electing a constitutional assembly; fifth, holding off on elections to secure a lasting freedom. If we held elections immediately, many people would vote for the Muslim Brotherhood, because they are organized, they have the media, and so on. If you allow for a year of real freedom, the Left, and the youth, can then organize themselves.

Now, the agenda is what we want in transition and as a final goal. First, the economic and social system should deliver for the popular classes.

They say to the World Bank and IMF, literally, "Go to hell!" Second, we want an independent foreign policy of Egypt, not tied to the United States and Israel. Third, we want a transitional government that includes the people. The current focus is on the transitional government.

Lau Kin Chi: What is the scale of the Popular Committees?

Samir Amin: During the first days, there was no name to these gatherings. Now, they have organized, as "Popular Committees." There are about five hundred in Egypt, practically covering the whole country. In Cairo, there are many, but there is no central one. Those that are relatively popular in lower- and middle-class places are very lively. This does not prevent intellectuals or bourgeois democrats not living there from going there. I assume in small cities it might be local, but I do not know. The youth, communists, trade unions, peasants, bourgeois democrats are all part of it. There are Muslim Brotherhood people, but they are not there as Muslim Brotherhood. What is important is that Popular Committees are not delegates or representatives of organizations. People know you are a leader of a certain trade union, or a leader of the Communist Party. It is not an elected representative organization. The active forces want to be there, and they are there. It was quite informal for a few months.

Lau Kin Chi: In the Popular Committees, do people discuss anything and everything?

Samir Amin: Yes, as you say, anything and everything. They discuss problems faced by the people: labor conditions, social and economic conditions, school and health, and the constitution.

Lau Kin Chi: Are the Popular Committees more a platform for discussion, interaction? Or are they followed up by some form of organization?

Samir Amin: They capture whatever they can capture and reflect these in their own organizations. It depends on whether the communists or the trade unions take the different views into account. All the people are organized; but they are not a straightjacket organization.

Lau Kin Chi: Do they form any federation? Alternatively, do they move away from traditional conventional forms of organization that are not top-down,

or based on representation? Are you saying these are convergences for exchanges, and there is no formal membership?

Samir Amin: I am saying there is no exclusion. And until now, attendance is high.

Lau Kin Chi: Usually how many in Cairo?

Samir Amin: It depends. In Cairo, the Syndicate of Journalists building is huge, of a Stalinist type, with meeting rooms for two to three thousand people on each floor, with ten floors; its two-hundred-plus rooms are continuously full. The people permanently occupy the building. The army wants to appear as neutral, though they are not. They have not associated with repression—they have not clashed with the people; hence, there is no reoccupation of the building. Depending on the hour, on the type of meeting, there might be fifty people in a room that can hold three thousand, but after a few hours, there might be two thousand people in attendance. It is unpredictable, but it is a continuous debate. When I was there—I went there almost every day—you go and discuss, and that is all. It is organized. You can say it is organized; it is a state in-between. That is why we want to make the transition a long one, independent of the elections. The movement cannot stop to wait for the elections or for the government to deal with all the problems that are there. We hope there will be crystallizations of organizations, formal alliances, or more explicitly organized forms. Until early May, everything was more implicit than explicit. People know what they agree and disagree on.

The Popular Committees, during the week of May 13, formed a National Council, to include around one hundred fifty people. They have not all been selected. These people would not be selected by some sort of leadership at the top. The council would bring together a dozen political parties, all those who claim to be socialist, communist, and democratic, yet would exclude the Muslim Brotherhood as a nondemocratic party, and would exclude the former bourgeois parties that supported Mubarak. Nevertheless, it would include all other now-established parties that claim to be democratic. All the independent trade unions immediately responded "Yes, we will participate." Also the independent peasant organization, Small Peasants for Resistance against Expropriation; they are not unified at the national level but exist at the provincial level. And youth organizations, which are in a very primitive state, in the sense that they are networks of thousands and tens of thousands of people—with names, which

are known—but with no leadership. They are free to organize themselves, as they want. There is no imposed leadership. The National Council has declared that it will devote time to elaborate a proposed constitution, and eventually, if we are victorious, to submit it to referendum, and then have election of parliament. Not a presidential system, but a parliamentary one, with a prime minister. This way, it is more representative than a quickly elected parliament.

In addition, instead of the present pattern of transition, it proposes a presidential committee with five persons, one from the army (we do not want to deny them any role), and the four others coming from this National Council, perhaps with one Muslim who is democratic.

Lau Kin Chi: No Muslim Brotherhood?

Samir Amin: No. The presidential committee can run the country through a long transition. The Muslim Brotherhood's exclusion is not because it is Islamic, as there are other Islamic movements in the council. It is only because the Muslim Brotherhood has taken a position against the movement that they are not a part of the movement. The Mubarak party takes a position against the movement and so excludes itself. The Muslim Brotherhood supported them, so it is not a part of the movement, though the Muslim Brotherhood is part of the Egyptian reality. This council is a council of the movement, and this is a very good step forward.

Lau Kin Chi: Was this quite unexpected?

Samir Amin: No, I was hoping for this development. I was afraid of some mistakes. I was afraid people would be jealous—why this person and not that person? I was always careful about this. There are always competitions, including of personalities. Some people have big ambitions, want to be president, head of the academy, of the government, ministers—there are plenty of people like that. This is normal, including among the communists. We assume they are good activists, but they are also human beings. We hope to overcome this.

Lau Kin Chi: Is ElBaradei in on this?

Samir Amin: ElBaradei has taken a position from the first day with the movement, so he is in. It is not an assembly of the socialists or the communists; it is an assembly of the movement. In the National Council, there are

Nasserians, Baradeis. The criterion is if you took a position with the movement, we do not ask you what your ideologies and goals are. If you were against the movement, we do not see why you have a place.

Lau Kin Chi: The Muslim Brotherhood does not want to be part of this?

Samir Amin: No, they want to make an Islamic front.

Lau Kin Chi: So they want an Islamic front against the democratic front. While there is this broad democratic front, there is also a proliferation of political parties. You have played a role in the formation of the Socialist Party.

Samir Amin: It is one of the Communist parties. My personal view is that we should not have only one party. People should associate as they like. I would be a member of all radical left parties that have more or less communist and Marxist traditions. I do not see any harm in being a member of two or three parties.

We should not have only one party; otherwise, there will be many personal struggles. The parties can have small different opinions that are not fundamental. Let the people meet, organize, and have their closest sympathies. This does not prevent various parties from working together in alliance. It is not necessary to move to the tradition of the Third International, or to *the* party, and what is not *the* party is the enemy. The youth would not accept it. They are close to and spontaneously sympathize with the communists, but they would not want to be members of Communist parties. They are right. I feel that now, when we call ourselves communist, others respect us. However, some people feel the name would frighten others, so we call ourselves the Socialist Party.

We should not introduce the problems of the parties into the movement. Otherwise, there will be endless internal debates on history. I was with the Maoists. Others were mostly Stalinist. Some others were semi-anarchist, semi-Trotskyist. We have all these currents in the new Socialist Party.

Lau Kin Chi: Apart from your Socialist Party, there are other social or Communist parties. How do you relate to one another?

Samir Amin: I am a member of the Socialist Party, but I am not an enemy of the others. I do not see necessary differences of quality of militancy between our members and their members. I do not consider the others as

traitors or deviations. The Socialist Party is not a new one, because many of us are old communists from the Egyptian Communist Party, but we want to go beyond the polemics of whether you are Stalinist, Maoist, or whatever.

Lau Kin Chi: So this is a regrouping?

Samir Amin: We do not take people away from the other parties. We do not open polemics among ourselves. In April 2011, five parties came together to establish an Alliance of the Socialist Forces. The Communist Party is a faction of the former Tagammu Party, the united party of the communists, and the Nasserians; they are, in my opinion, very good comrades, but they are nostalgic of old communism; yet there is no reason to exclude them and insult them as old Stalinists. The Popular Democratic Alliance is the majority faction of the former Tagammu Party. The Democratic Labor Party, if I were to use the old language, which I do not want to do, is anarcho-syndicalist, and they are communist in ideology, giving a specific importance to working among the working class; they are probably de facto the closest to the trade unions. And the Revolutionary Socialist Party, the former Trotskyists.

Lau Kin Chi: How influential, and how numerous, are the five Communist parties?

Samir Amin: All together, they may total ten thousand people. Their social and ideological influence in the country is far greater than their number. You find here all the productive intellectuals, all the de facto leaders of trade unions and organizations. They are able to make a speech or write a paper that has influence. The best journalists, the best of almost everything.

Lau Kin Chi: What distinguishes your party from the other four Communist parties, in terms of program or component?

Samir Amin: The programs are similar, and they come out of the movement. As to what they imagine "socialism" to be, then you have the widest curiosity. For some people, the Soviet, Stalinist model was socialist. Socialism for them is state nationalization and planning. Full stop.

Lau Kin Chi: And democracy is not included in this?

Samir Amin: They are not terribly democratic people. This is associated with a very strong nationalism, in the positive way, for national indepen-

dence and south-south alliance, nonaligned. Democracy is not their problem. They do not see why they do not attract the youth.

I know many of the old guards of the Left. Sadat put one in jail in 1971. We are in the same party. He asked why I did not visit him when he was head of the police during the Nasserian time. I asked him, "Do you remember, you were the head of police who ordered my arrest?" And he said, "Ah, yes!"

The current alliance of the Communist parties should not be an alliance of the top. Their members should meet to decide together common actions and eventually to jointly sign pamphlets. We do not compel people to be members of one party.

Lau Kin Chi: Are some people members of more than one party?

Samir Amin: It depends on the rules of each party.

Lau Kin Chi: It is important to have parties, for one cannot avoid the question of political positions and political programs. Electoral parties compete for voters, and so electoral politics constrains them. From the experience of the Egyptian movement, do you see new elements or old legacies? Are there innovative forms of organization? In the latest developments of the alliance of the Left, or the National Council, are there ways of organizing that avoid anarchism without going back to the old ways?

Samir Amin: It is not possible to answer your question. Let us be modest. It is no more the concept of the Third International, or trade unions, et cetera, led by the party. If we try to have one party, like the Third International pattern, because there is only one good party, and all others are enemies, we would be lost. We do not want to go into all these debates. One front, but not one party. Plural parties, not one party. They do not necessarily agree on everything but have common ground on the socialist perspective, anti-imperialism, independence, and benefits for the popular working class. They might have differences in strategy, or different visions in the long run of the connection between democratization of society and socialization of the economy. We leave these matters of disagreement open to discussion, but this must not prevent us from agreeing on a minimum program or on day-to-day action. We also include in the front independent organizations, trade unions, and youth organizations. From this perspective, this is innovative. In the Popular Committees, people represent different political forces and organizations, trade unions, syndicates of doctors, journalists. It is a

front of all these people. To bring all into one party would be a disaster. Even the bourgeoisie now understands that they will not have only one party, but several, all called democratic, popular [*laughs*], with billionaires and bankers.

Will it succeed or fail? Can it promote effective, strong action, unite and not divide the people? Or will it fall into anarchism and polemics? Many people are aware of the dangers and try to avoid them, but I cannot swear that this will not occur.

Lau Kin Chi: Samir, you are very open-minded about the party! How does that come about, the way you relate to the Left?

Samir Amin: That is a long story, my struggle in the party. I am not alone, but I am in the minority. The majority of the activists are party-minded. They do not look at the party as a historical form of organization. I am not against organization, because I do not think that things will change by themselves. However, from time to time and from situation to situation, they change; there is not one good forever. The Second and Third Internationals are examples of ideology of the supreme form—*the* party, and the only good one. History has proven that there is no one good party. I said Tito's Communist Party was not the worst party in Yugoslavia, but in the end, it turned out to be stupid. It happens. Parties are part of the history of society; they change, they can change for better or worse, and they appear in different forms. It should not be sacrosanct.

It is like the church, the good religion, and the church representing the good religion, which is supposed to be forever. I think it is a non-Marxist vision of organization. What I call historical Marxism is Marxism as it is understood by people who call themselves Marxist. People who call themselves Marxist are only part of history. It does not mean we have an alternative blueprint. At least in the visible future, it will be an alliance of organizations.

We can get the support of the majority in our society on the following three unified demands: (1) democratization and secularization of society with women's rights, et cetera, not only multiparty elections; (2) progressive, social transformation, not necessarily socialist; and (3) anti-imperialism and the land question. On these issues, they can converge. The objective conditions in Europe are different from ours. On these three issues, we can get the majority, in terms of the popular classes and the middle class.

However, in Europe and the United States, it is not so, because society benefits from the imperialist rent. The imperialist rent is not just

superprofit for monopolies; it has a social influence. The reproduction of society as it is needs imperialist rent. Therefore, there is a kind of complicity. It was not by pure chance, all the revolutions of the twentieth century—Russia, China, Vietnam, Cuba, and now Nepal, Latin America. The wave against neoliberalism is in the emergent countries, but nothing important is happening in Europe.

Lau Kin Chi: We have, on the one hand, political parties with hierarchy and organization, and, on the other hand, anarchic, horizontal democracy. Where is the National Council?

Samir Amin: Both types of features are there.

Lau Kin Chi: Is it one party, one vote?

Samir Amin: For example, the Egyptian Socialist Party has five members, and five to six parties have thirty to forty members. The total number in the council is around one hundred fifty; it may have more. An organization can come and say, "We have been with the movement," and then it is welcome. Then the people will see how to have a balance of representation in the council. It is not a majority of socialists or communists, not a majority of the young, not a majority of the bourgeois democrats . . .

Lau Kin Chi: How will this be managed, in reality? It would take a lot of mutual respect, and making the needs of the movement a priority.

Samir Amin: Yes, through the movement, people have learned to have mutual respect. Even the people who did not give much importance to politics were struggling together, hiding from the police, fighting, mobilizing, and sending out pamphlets. There is mutual respect, but not consensus.

Lau Kin Chi: Historically, in times of hardship, people have solidarity, genuine sentiments of solidarity. However, with power and fame . . .

Samir Amin: Absolutely, there is no guarantee.

Lau Kin Chi: How is the National Council, from the very beginning, conceived and formed by taking certain precautions or channeling toward certain directions?

Samir Amin: I do not know. It is too early to say—it has just started. The Popular Committees have continued to push their demands for a new democracy with all freedoms, such as organization and access to the media. They will deliberate on the concept of a new constitution, so that the elected assembly will be a constitutional assembly, not a legislative assembly, even if the government makes its soft amendments to the present constitution.

It is too early to know how this new government will manage the condition. The movement has not completed its project. The leadership of the army wants a strong transition with an election, in which, of course, the Muslim Brotherhood will be highly represented. We want a slow transition in order to allow the new political, democratic forces to organize themselves, to elaborate their programs and projects, and to have access to public opinion, before the elections.

Wang Hui: Maybe this is the key to whether this movement can become a truly revolutionary movement. The broad social movement can form its program and leadership only through the form of the Popular Committees and by taking part in the process of redrafting the constitution. The current formal democracy is likely to facilitate the domination of the parliament and the power center by organizations already existing during the former regime, such as the Muslim Brotherhood or personalities from the military. In fact, the Mubarak regime also had some form of democracy, but its parliamentary representation and its electoral system were not representative and were autocratic political forms. Whether a genuine civil government can form through mass democracy is key to the political trend of Egyptian politics. This is a challenge to today's youth movement, the workers' movement, and progressive organizations in Egypt.

One of the goals of the social movement is to set up a civil government, which means this should be neither a military government nor a religious government. Which is the true meaning of the word *civil*. Tactically, the movement requires a certain period of preparation, so that based on broad mobilization and participation, the agenda, and the representatives, can emerge for their direct intervention into the political process after the mass movement. Mubarak's police dictatorship has deprived Egyptian society of political spaces. Apart from the underground Communist Party and the Muslim Brotherhood, society is in a state of depoliticization.

The current task is for repoliticization, and society is in the process of repoliticization. Depoliticization is the cause for both the collapse of the Mubarak regime and the dilemma facing social movements today. If the soft

transition tactic is partially successful, that is, if the military and the police support Mubarak's fall, then the most important challenge for the mass movement will be whether it can sustain and form clearer objectives. You think the youth are supportive of the Left, but the Right and the Muslim Brotherhood would also attempt to sow differentiation among the youth. What is most important is that the youth and the democrats are not pro–United States.

Lau Kin Chi: The youth are usually represented as either going to the street or going on the Internet. There may be some mystification of the Internet as a form of autonomous communication and association, in lieu of and as opposed to conventional forms of association and organization. Surely, the Internet served to spread ideas and information. How do the "youth" keep up these lively debates and organization? The mainstream media want to portray that things are returning to normal, that the youth have a short attention span, and that interest in the Internet is ad hoc. My intuition is that there is a deep politicization process going on that compares to the wave of radicalization of the 1960s. They may not result in direct outcomes, but the impact is profound.

Samir Amin: Absolutely. I think there are two, three, four million people in Egypt who are daily and continuously active. They have opinions and express them. People make analogies to the Berlin Wall, but this is nonsense. They are making analogies to societies totally out of context. It is ridiculous. Information technology is available as an instrument. We should be cautious. The youth are not a class and are not homogeneous. The youth make networks for political reasons. An ordinary Egyptian does not know English. The one million bloggers in Egypt are people from the lower middle class, with education, but exclusively in Arabic; 70 percent are progressive, 30 percent are confused, but none is reactionary. The 5 percent who write in English, and are the most known outside, are reactionary. They are Americanized, brainwashed completely. They speak and write English; they can hardly write good Arabic. In some cases, they are laughable. I was at a wedding in Egypt of a son of an Egyptian billionaire, and they speak English exclusively among themselves. There was a band that played popular music, and only then did they discover there is local music, and were told that this was authentic Egyptian music. There is a small population of upper middle and very rich people who are completely Americanized and have nothing to do with the country. The new generation of professionals

are children of very rich landlords. They are foreigners in their own country. They are, of course, pro–United States, pro-neoliberalism. They are bourgeois democrats. Many reports are about them. If the other sectors go on decline, they would come onto the front stage, like what happened in Eastern Europe.

Wang Hui: Can the democrats propose any objectives?

Samir Amin: Many democrats are neutral, not against the Americans. ElBaradei is rather naïve about the Americans being for democracy. We continue repeating that the goal of the United States is not democracy.

Beyond Parliamentary Democracy

Wen Tiejun: Since the mainstream considers the political and value system of the developed countries as universal, it is difficult for anyone to cast doubt on the problems of the formal political superstructure, including multiparty parliamentary democracy, freedom of the press, universal suffrage, et cetera. However, when people resort to this ideologized mainstream discourse of social sciences of the West, they deliberately ignore the fact that the modern superstructure corresponding to the global expansion of capital lacks the support of the economic infrastructure in developing countries, hence it has a counterrole to play in suppressing or constraining the economic infrastructure.

The superstructure is costly for developed countries; the more modernized the political system, the worse is the total debt of the country. The middle class, as the majority of the population, goes for "overpoliticization" in vulgar consumerism and welfarism. Hence, even if marginalized groups in many developing countries accept the mainstream discourse of human rights, democracy, and freedom promoted by politicians in the West and lack their own discourse-formation capacity, such a generalized and popularized global discourse is embarrassing, because the demand for such modernized politics disregards the fact that the economic infrastructure cannot afford the huge costs.

I think the street politics in these countries lack clear organizational discipline or a partisan program. They are neither the traditional class struggle in the West in the nineteenth century nor the nationalist politics of decolonization struggles in the developing countries in the twentieth century. Their nature is social unrest incurred by the developing coun-

tries shouldering excessive costs of the global economic crisis due to their single-product economy. The fatigue of the people is long-term. The sudden eruption is due to two immediate crises: high inflation and high unemployment.

Samir Amin: Again, I agree with your analysis. I have written papers on the limits and contradictions of "liberal democracy," in other words, multi-party elections. This pattern of political management of society does not disturb the control of monopoly capital. It comes to be "no democracy" for the majority. Therefore, it delegitimizes democracy, to the benefit of "religious" false alternatives. It satisfies only the appetites of consumerist middle classes.

I remain less pessimistic than you seem to be. Many of the younger generation understand that the capitalist crisis caused these problems; hence, the movement carries with it a natural resistance to capitalist globalization. It thus goes to the root of the problem. In the process of a mass democratic movement, the people push for genuine social and economic progress to resolve the crisis.

Wang Hui: There is a strong spontaneity in the movement in Egypt, with various forces suddenly joining in the torrential movement. This movement is distinct from mass movements of the twentieth century, wherein party politics is the mechanism for mobilization. It is also distinct from a pure class movement, even though the working class and the traditional left are also main participants in the movement. After the movement started, many political organizations and opportunists attempted to represent the movement so they could negotiate with the government, but the mass movement rejected their claim to representation.

Lau Kin Chi: The social contradictions have so accumulated that any incident can trigger eruptions. What has happened since the suicidal burning of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia no one could have foreseen, because while the eruption of such a massive uprising seems to be so sudden and spontaneous, the necessary preliminary work of planning and building the movement seems to be absent. It is not foreseeable particularly because to our rational mind, accustomed to calculative and measured thinking, it is unimaginable that what we deem as passive agencies produced in an atomized society can become other than what they are—marginalized, excluded, divided, and disparate elements, barely capable of meeting the

needs of survival. This is not so much a question of having faith in the people as a question of the theoretical underpinning that makes it impossible to hold such a faith, except as a blind faith. I believe it is important to think through how it is possible that a multiplicity of isolated individuals subject to intersecting fields of constraints and coercions can break away and transform themselves into revolutionary subjects in no time at all. I think this is important for a rethinking of alliances and solidarity, with regard not only to resistance but also to building new forms of democratic units for practices outside the logic of capital. We have witnessed in this Egyptian uprising a multiplicity of actors who are not organized or deployed as a disciplined army directed from a central military or party command, but can transform themselves in no time, making their own decisions for action, not individually as such but mutually affecting each other. The multiple sites of initiatives interacting with each other, rather than their "weakness" of a lack of centrality, turn out to be their "strength"—the movement constitutes a continuously weaving and interweaving web, uncontainable by any ideological dogma, dynamic in its responsiveness to concrete situations.

Whether mass mobilizations develop effective forms of linking and organizing may not be visible to the mass media or the public, but what is certain is the politicization of millions in the process. Apart from conventional organizational forms of political parties, such as the "January 25 Party for Development and Renaissance" or the Socialist Party, we need to see how new movements such as the "April 6 Youth Movement" have a history going back to political engagement since the 2008 general strike. On the other hand, we need to see how the boosted morale and sense of dignity and confidence translate into forces for community organization and participation at local sites, for these constitute the long-term movement for profound cultural change.

Samir Amin: Yes, again, the patterns of the repoliticization of the new generation follow lines to which the "old guard" of the radical left [the communist tradition in Egypt] is not accustomed. We have to learn . . .

The people are fed up with everything, with the police. If the police happen to arrest you, even if it is only because of a red light, you will be beaten and tortured. There is the daily torture and repression from the police; the Egyptian police number 1.2 million! They have absolute impunity. Most ugly. The Mafia system has disgusted the people, too. The entrepreneurs that the World Bank says are the future are gangsters. Where do they get their fortune? From selling land of the state given to them by the state

for nothing, for building projects—wealth accumulated by dispossession. They are squeezing the real entrepreneurs.

Lau Kin Chi: The military owns 40 percent of the economy. They are therefore defenders of their own interests and not only an instrument of the state in defending class rule. Do they own it in private forms, or in so-called state-owned economy?

Samir Amin: The state has privatized what it once owned, and in the process of privatization, the army has gained ownership. In some areas, a group of officers owns this or that; in some cases, the army—nobody knows what this means—has ownership. The term *Army Incorporated* has become a common term.

Lau Kin Chi: In some media reports, market-economy advocates complain that the military is an obstacle to a free, open-market economy.

Samir Amin: That is duplicity. They have given money to the army, as part of the concessions of the compromise between the United States and the army.

Lau Kin Chi: Egypt has had a long tradition of economic struggles. We all know about the famous Bread Riots of January 1977, when hundreds of thousands of people protested in major cities across Egypt, forcing the regime to withdraw the policy of canceling food subsidies, a demand imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. In the last few years, there has been a wave of prominent labor strikes. How do you think five million workers would wield their strength as workers intervening in class relations as well as demonstrating for civil rights? Can you say something more about the federation of independent trade unions that formed during the movement to bring down Mubarak? There have been many labor strikes since Mubarak left—rail workers, Suez Canal workers, petroleum workers—signaling the people's continuation of the struggle on the economic front. The fear of the authorities is apparent in the government's attempts to introduce a law to criminalize strikes and protests that disrupt the economy. Can you tell us how the political and economic struggles in the movement converge in demand and in action?

Samir Amin: The wave of strikes in Egypt three years ago was the strongest on the African continent, South Africa included, in fifty years. The state has

completely controlled the official trade unions, since the time of Nasser, like the Soviet model of state control of the trade union. The strike did not start from the trade union leadership, but from the bottom. We can say it was spontaneous, in that no leadership initiated it. It was a success, a gigantic success. Three years ago, the regime wanted to send in the police. The companies said no, it would be impossible, because the factories could be destroyed. They negotiated. The strikes won very small concessions, a 10 percent, or 15 percent, increase in wages, which was less than what inflation destroyed during those years. However, it won something important for dignity, and for trade union rights, such as no firing of workers without the knowledge of the trade union. They established themselves as new, independent trade unions. They are now participating in the Popular Committees and the National Council. Indeed, there are a number of economic and social demands, hence the strikes.

Lau Kin Chi: Are the people in Egypt critical of parliamentary democracy?

Samir Amin: Of course, of course. After the revolution of 1920, there was the parliament, but the first parliament could not govern.

Struggle on the Economic Front

Wen Tiejun: China in the 1910s also attempted parliamentary democracy, which also failed.

The street politics in northern Africa in the recent period are a continuation of the global capitalist crisis. The global economic crisis induced by the Wall Street financial tsunami caused global inflation, as the financial-capital-dominant countries used their political hegemony to further expand credit. Contemporary imperialism's financial credit is no longer determined by the market. There is no possibility of practicing liberal economic theory in the era of finance monopoly capital. The state's political hegemony created the two "visible hands" in this era—the state's debt credit and the state's financial credit. Hence, when the core capitalist countries face a crisis, their governments, enjoying strong financial capital status, all resort to credit expansion and show no self-restraint by reducing the credit created by the government's hands. In fact, the global economic crisis of the financial bubble originating in the core countries can only lead to further expansion of credit in the core countries, no matter which party is in power. This is the visible, overt "conspiracy." Surely, global inflation will worsen. Developing countries that are reliant on the excess credit of foreign govern-

ments to import food and consumer goods will bear the cost of the financial crisis of the core countries. This means that when capitalist core countries directly create inflation through increased currency and bonds, they concurrently transfer the costs to developing countries.

When countries with a postcolonial economy such as Egypt confront high inflation and high unemployment, the nature of their street politics cannot but be the opposition between the transfer of the debt crisis from core countries and the recipients of the costs of the crisis in developing countries with a weak economic infrastructure. This is a fundamental contradiction of contemporary capitalist globalization. The West creates and politically controls such weak economic infrastructure and colonial economies.

Hence, in relatively small developing countries encountering high inflation and high unemployment, a series of political eruptions would occur due to their shouldering excessive inflation transferred from the credit expansion of the global crisis.

In my exchange with scholars and activists from Africa, no one believes that the outcome of such street politics can alleviate the two highs faced by the people. This is the current tragedy of developing countries. After the street politics, any readjustment or substitution of the political superstructure in these developing countries may not necessarily mean a strengthening of the economic infrastructure, which may further bog down in crisis with the costs of Western-style superstructure or ideology. The tragic continuation of the political turmoil in northern Africa—whether it is a change in the person or the regime, whether it is dictatorship or democracy—is because high inflation and high unemployment, as costs transferred from the global crisis, cannot be resolved.

Samir Amin: Yes, the deepening of the crisis, the means that transfer its costs to the developing countries, has been decisive. This has led to events accelerating into an "explosion." Yes, it is quite clear that no one can provide an answer to those challenges in the short run. Any real progress will imply some degree of "delinking" from capitalist globalization. We have entered a period of long continuous struggles.

The system is strong—nobody can get rid of the system in five minutes. It will be a long process. Nobody in Egypt is antistatist. They feel the state is responsible for the economy. The blah-blah of the market solving problems, nobody buys. The state must take up the responsibilities, subsidies, control, nationalizations, et cetera. The strategy of imperialism is to disintegrate nations. We need to strengthen the autonomy of nation-states

for negotiated globalization, which would mean delinking and creating conditions, not adjusting to global capital. We need a strong, popular, democratic state to restrict capital and to fight imperialism. There would be simultaneously revolutionary advances by the people for social progress, with socialism being the long perspective.

Lau Kin Chi: Though Mubarak is gone, the army and vested interests are intact and not criminalized. How can people bring about changes? There are always people's revolts that remove the symbolic figure, but nothing much changes.

Samir Amin: We start by modifying the balance of forces between the popular forces and the state. The army selected the present government. Insignificant people who wait for orders. Those people do not know what to do; they discuss only what concessions we can give today to avoid the demonstrations of tomorrow, so it is not a government. The army does not want to take the responsibility, so they say this is civilian rule. To appear neutral, the army even put one communist in the cabinet, Gouda Abdel-Khalek, minister of social affairs; nobody knows what he is in charge of. He is a one-man ministry.

Workers demand better wages and working conditions, guarantee of employment, nationalization of the bank, and that the state reorganize the economy to make it functional. The state sector remains important in Egypt. Objective difficulties have continuously stopped the process of privatization. Foreign capital does not want it; local capital wants to do something different, to establish new industries. Therefore, the public sector is there, though has been declining for twenty years, from 30 percent of non-agricultural production down to 14 percent.

In Egypt, we have major industries, including textiles, agrofoods, chemicals, fibers, fertilizers, pesticides; they meet almost 100 percent of domestic demand. None of them is competitive for exports. Probably not because they are poorly managed, but because of poor policy. It is not correct to say there is no industry in Egypt. The industries have never been export-oriented, but always for the local market.

Lau Kin Chi: But how competitive are they with imported goods?

Samir Amin: They are in danger, and that is precisely why even the Mubarak government did not completely open the market. The Egyptian bourgeoisie

does not want it. It wants to be associated with, but not dispossessed by, foreign capital.

Lau Kin Chi: In other countries, opening up in the name of the WTO destroys the industries.

Samir Amin: In 2002, Mubarak had a liberal prime minister. Previous ones were false liberals, though they were pro–United States. The real liberal was an Egyptian capitalist prime minister, who felt that Egyptian industries should be competitive for export, export-oriented, and he referred to China. However, the military removed him in 2006.

Egypt is less food-dependent than many other third world countries. Food, vegetables, animals. Rich peasants want to exclude small peasants who are not competitive. They want small peasants to give their land to the rich peasants to increase productivity. Many landless peasants migrated to Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Now they return and move into the informal rural economy. Small peasants, while they cannot migrate, are menaced. They form the small peasants' movement. The communists say they should participate in the intensification of production by semi-cooperatives. Not cooperatives in which the peasants give up the ownership of the land. The Right feels that rich peasants can do it at no cost to the state.

Lau Kin Chi: What is the size of the small peasants' sector?

Samir Amin: We have fifteen million peasants among a population of fifty-five million. The vast majority are small peasants. A small minority owns the majority of the land. The rich peasants are the base of the Muslim Brotherhood, for the state's conservative Islam. Their children become lawyers, doctors, officers of the army. The people you meet every day are not the very rich who go to the United States. They are homogeneous. We now have pauperization of the lower middle class, a downward mobility. And unemployment for the youth.

Lau Kin Chi: Is the demand for land or for land reform proposed by the movement?

Samir Amin: The movement now is against the aggression of capitalism, but it does look for positive alternatives. The alternative, in my opinion, is organizing the small peasants in the intensification of agriculture, to keep

the people on the land. The Chinese pattern. Leftist economic groups, who are acquainted with peasants' rights—people like Wen Tiejun, who knows agricultural problems, et cetera—also know the formulas for intensification. The objective is to make proposals for an alternative policy. The political result is to reduce the influence of the rich peasants.

Lau Kin Chi: What do you mean by "intensification of agriculture"?

Samir Amin: I mean obtaining a higher yield per hectare, raising land productivity, providing more labor, in order to keep people on the land.

Lau Kin Chi: The question of land distribution is not immediately on the agenda?

Samir Amin: At this point, it would be a revolutionary attack on the rich peasants.

Lau Kin Chi: Not like Nepal. Under the Maoists, the peasants have seized land. Nevertheless, the Maoist leadership itself put a brake on the process, conceding to legalistic constitutional and parliamentary procedures.

Samir Amin: The rich peasants are not a transmission belt for imperialism, but they are allies. The Egyptian reactionary forces are strong and clever; they are not lackeys but allies of imperialism. Even the head of the army knew that the United States, which is not even three hundred years old, should not tell us—with five thousand years of history—how to run the country. I guess China also uses this type of language—we both have a long history. This shows that the people know this is true, not a fabrication.

Lau Kin Chi: The people's revolution cannot but address the question of redistribution of wealth and change in property relations. Is there any prospect of economic struggles going beyond demand for increased wages and welfare, or protests against inflation and unemployment, to articulate a socialist or communist agenda? Are there such programmatic discussions and debates in Egypt? Skepticism about a vanguard party is one thing; aversion to programmatic debate is another thing. The radical left may not be organizationally strong, but it can play a prominent political role in the intervention of radical thought guiding effective action.

Samir Amin: In the movement, there are people with higher understanding, and they are socialist; they think economic demands should go in the direction toward socialism. There are also those who are not fundamentally critical about capitalism—they are only against this particular capitalism—so they demand only social welfare, et cetera.

Wen Tiejun: In recent years, the price of three staple foods has soared, due firstly to the expansion of agrofuel, and secondly to excessive financial flow into the futures market. Thus, the rise of food prices is a product of the global economic crisis. In terms of the trend, resource shortage plus capital surplus will definitely worsen human security; the impact of the global economic crisis on human security is long-term.

Like most other North African and Middle East countries, Egypt has wheat as its staple food. The biggest agricultural import in Egypt is wheat; hence, its dependency on food imports is very high. In 2007, before the eruption of the financial crisis in the West caused surplus capital to assault grain prices, Egypt's import of wheat had already grown by 60 percent. In 2008, when the global food crisis erupted due to the financial crisis, Egypt's wheat import continued to grow. By 2010, when global wheat prices had risen by 100 percent, Egypt still had to import huge amounts of wheat. Hence, from the ratio of high-priced imports in domestic consumption, half the urban population is finding it difficult to get food. Street politics thus erupted in urban areas. The peasants were not participating.

Samir Amin: Indeed, the food crisis has been one of the reasons for the success of the movement—fifteen million people joining on the second day a movement that started with one million.

It is much more difficult to connect the peasant movement. There has always been a radical movement since 1920. You have the *latifundias*, but there are also the rich peasants, who are very strong in rural society, since they are not the absentees, and they have relations with the government, lawyers, and doctors. There are the middle peasants, the poor and the very poor peasants, and the landless. The situation of the landless, curiously, has not deteriorated in the last thirty years, because they have migrated to the Gulf countries for work, and they have made some small money, which has allowed them not to buy back land but to establish themselves in grey, informal economic activities. Conditions menace the poor, because the neoliberal market allows and facilitates their expropriation by the rich peasants, new capitalist landowners, and modern Egyptian com-

panies associated with agrobusiness. They are very radical. They are not anticommunist, but they do not know what communism is. They simply do not know.

Wang Hui: The traditional left and the communist movement have a stronger influence among the workers, but not with the peasants?

Samir Amin: It is the weakness of the communists that they have never been able to integrate the peasants. The only people who went to talk to them were the communists—not the Muslims, not the bourgeois democrats. Nobody has any influence on them. Nevertheless, they have continued their struggles.

Wang Hui: In the third world, the mobilization and role of the peasants are always an important link.

Samir Amin: The peasants have mobilized in the small villages, but there are no links with the global movement. They do not participate in the Popular Committees that are discussing the transition.

Wang Hui: So the movement is mostly urban?

Samir Amin: Yes, also in small towns.

Wang Hui: Faced with the so-called soft transition tactic of the ruling blocs of the United States and Egypt, how do the masses respond?

Samir Amin: People are fed up with American dictates. Egyptians are good nationalists. We ask, how can we be so low that the American ambassador and president dictate everything every day? There is also the social degradation. Unemployment and poverty are growing for the majority; inequality is gigantic. So all that combined. The government has no legitimacy. Now that is no more. Sudden explosions. People got killed. They know that if you struggle, you may die.

Repercussions in the Arab World

Wang Hui: Sadat went alone into negotiations with Israel with the support of the United States. In the past thirty years, the Arab World has lacked

unity. Egypt, as the lead sheep in the Arab World, has had great influence on the Arab World. Even though Mubarak played a special role in the Palestine-Israel talks, Egypt's international influence, especially in the Arab World, has, in effect, diminished. A friend of mine in Egypt was excited about the current movement and told me that the world is finally rediscovering Egypt as an important country! The situation in the Arab World is very complicated and intricate, and the most influential countries are those countries under dictatorship that are pro–United States and pro-capitalism. How would this movement in Egypt affect the unity of the Arab World and the social movements within the Arab World? What is Israel's attitude toward the changes in these countries?

Samir Amin: Israel is nothing more than the United States; it is the enemy. The United States and Israel will combine their strategy, for sure, to minimize the radicalism of the movements. Israel does not do anything without the permission of Washington.

The developments in Egypt will have an echo, but each country is different in the components of the movements, the structures of the regimes, and the forms of their integration into imperialist globalization. Compared to Egypt, Tunisia has a higher level of education and higher standard of living, but it is much less important, not because the country is small but because it is vulnerable in the global economy, and the movement does not question capitalism. They look for neoliberal capitalism with a human face, for shared benefits of the middle class against the monopoly of the ruling family. For that reason, the EU and World Bank have come into Tunisia with a program of relaunching the economy, as it was—no change in the orientation of the economy, the same export-oriented economy, tourism, et cetera. There is a counterbalancing of the negative effects by redistributing the national income and reducing the miserable areas. It is not a program of productivity. It is not anti-imperialist. It is much more liberal.

Wang Hui: It seems the people in Tunisia are better organized, and the people in Egypt are more spontaneous. There would surely be an impact on Palestine?

Samir Amin: Sure. Also an impact on Syria, which is very complex. It is very difficult to know the impact on Iraq. In Yemen, the movements in the north and the south are different; the north is relatively moderate, whereas the south is much more radical, because the trade unions and the Communist Party are stronger. South Yemen is nationalist populist left, with

Marxist rhetoric and some thinking of the radical left—the strong feeling for one nation. It is like Korea, with a backward north and an advanced south. Yemen may split again, because the south cannot accept unity.

Wang Hui: How do you see what is going on in Bahrain and Libya? How do you see the similarities and differences between the movements in Egypt and the other countries?

Samir Amin: A domino effect, no doubt, after the movement in Egypt. Each country has different conditions. Bahrain is a very small country, but the majority being Shi'ite, and the monarchy being Sunni, there have always been tensions. The popular demand is only for constitutional democracy and equality between the Shi'ites and the Sunnis in the kingdom.

In Libya, as you can see, it is terrible, because the Gaddafi regime bombed and killed the people with real bullets. I have no idea of the components of their movement and their demands. Libya is not a nation. It is a geographical territory. It is part of the long history of nineteenth-century imperialism. The Ottoman Empire created Libya. It was not a nation before Gaddafi, Gaddafi did not transform it into a nation, and it will not become a nation after Gaddafi. Gaddafi came to power with the coup d'etat in 1969. He could go from one extreme to another. He had a nationalist, socialist rhetoric, but when he came to neoliberalism, the argument was funny. He openly said, "I am turning to neoliberalism because the Westerners like it."

Lau Kin Chi: He openly declared it, that it was because the Westerners liked it?!

Samir Amin: Yes! Even with the NATO bombing, it did not make Gaddafi a clever, leftist, nationalist figure. Looking at the change of his cap, we know this is the person.

Lau Kin Chi: The color of the cap changing from red to green?

Samir Amin: Yes, childish. In spite of all that, he achieved a number of things with oil revenue. The rights of women were not so bad. Four years ago, when Gaddafi moved to neoliberalism and he gave the management of oil companies to foreign companies, the Western powers liked it but feared he was unpredictable. He could the next morning take back the oil companies and give them to the Indians or the Chinese. Firstly, his popularity rested on anti-West nationalism, and, secondly, the Gaddadfa tribe

where he came from gave strong support to him. The so-called opposition to Gaddafi is not a popular movement; from the first day, it has been a military revolt, with guns. After the first shooting, they called NATO to the rescue. Who are these people? It is the Muslim Brotherhood in Benghazi.

Lau Kin Chi: The media reported that they set up a central bank immediately in Benghazi.

Samir Amin: Gaddafi's army's response was a mess. The plan of the United States was to get rid of Gaddafi, put in a puppet, get the guarantee for oil, and, most importantly, establish a military base.

Lau Kin Chi: There is also the currency issue, because Gaddafi planned to have all oil transactions not in US dollars, but in Euros. That would undermine the United States' position of financial domination. The United States purged Saddam Hussein for this same move.

Samir Amin: I think the military base is the most important factor. The chairman of the Libyan Transitional Council is Mustafa Mohamed Abdel Jalil, who was the president of the appeal court and *in that capacity* reconfirmed the condemnation to death of the Bulgarian nurses. He was rewarded for that and named minister of justice by Gaddafi, from 2007 until February 2011! The prime minister of Bulgaria, Boyko Borisov, noticed it, protested, and on that basis refused to "recognize" the Transitional Council. His protest had no effect on the European and NATO partners, who disregarded his argument. It seems, also, that the "military counselor" of Abdel Jalil is Omar El-Hariri, who was the officer who tortured the nurses. Good, excellent defenders of human rights!

Libya will be in a deadlock for a long time. If the Western powers fail, Libya will be like Somalia. Somalia has thirty-five governments. It is no country. It is total chaos, including piracy.

The difference between Egypt and Libya is that the movement in Egypt is not chaos, and the movement is growing as a strong political movement. It is relatively well organized. That is very positive and important. During the first days, there were a number of attempts to create chaos by the government releasing criminals and setting buildings on fire, but these attempts failed. The people have behaved maturely. There was no chaos.

Lau Kin Chi: What has contributed to this maturity? Is it because the youth are better educated, or are there some cultural traditions in Egypt?

Samir Amin: It is a combination of many things. Bourgeois liberals and communists have shaped Egyptian political culture. The bourgeois liberals are anti-imperialist and democratic. In addition, there are the communists. Their points of reference are the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, and the Chinese Revolution, not the US Congress. It is deep in the Egyptian political culture. If you speak of liberty, equality, fraternity, the people would say, yes we know. If you speak of the red star, or the worker-and-peasant alliance, the people would say, yes we know. If you speak of the US Congress, nobody responds. This is in the political culture: bourgeois democratic and communist. Our revolutions are long and not chaotic.

Lau Kin Chi: Yet in terms of the entire Arab World, there is chaos.

Samir Amin: The Arab World has inherited the division of the Roman Empire between the Western and the Eastern empires. The division is exactly in the middle of Libya. The division occurred in AD 450. The Arabs came not long after, in 700, and inherited the boundary. The boundary is a deep cultural boundary. Even if all the people gradually get Arabic in religion and language, there is still the boundary. One thing is symbolically interesting. The eastern part drinks tea and calls it *chai*, because it came to Mashreq through the caravans from north China. The western part, Maghreb, calls it *tai*, because they get tea through the Portuguese, from south China, and the south Chinese pronunciation is "ta." Cyrenaica, the eastern part, was Hellenic and the culture and language were Greek. The Khalifat got its culture and civilization out of translation from the Greek. Tripolitania, the western part, was Latin, Roman. By pure chance, France later colonized it. The division is very strong.

There is a photograph in a book of geography of my father at school. In 1930, the boundary of Egypt was not the boundary of today. It included Eastern Libya. I am not saying this out of chauvinism. How did it happen? When the British occupied Egypt in 1882, what was important for them were the Suez Canal and the Nile Valley. They did not want to displease the Ottoman Empire too much. Therefore, they gave them the eastern part of the Libyan coast, Benghazi. The Ottomans were not interested in the desert; then, there was not the issue of oil. The desert was still Egypt's. Also in 1882, the French took over Tunisia; they were interested in Tunis, not the desert. Oil was not on the agenda. So as not to annoy the Ottomans, they gave them the coast of Tarabulus.

When the Italians went to war in 1911, they conquered the coast of west and east Libya. In 1915, when they went into the First World War with

the British, the English—to please them—gave them part of the desert of the southeast. This is how Libya was formed. Hence, it is not a country. The west was part of Maghreb; the east was part of Mashreq. Now it is reflected in the tribes of the west and the east, in their language, tea drinking, everything. I will not condemn Gaddafi, the poor man, for not building a nation out of that.

The nationalist, socialist rhetoric did not have much effect. In China, with historically deeply rooted nations, you have a sense of history. The Chinese can understand this. American people cannot understand this. The United States and Libya are superficial and ignorant. The question of the depth of history is totally unknown to them. I do not know what will happen in the future. For the Mashreq, you will have the emerging countries coming together. Turkey, China, and Egypt are the three historically rooted nations; they are not fabrications. Nevertheless, with conflict among themselves, they are not one; they are three. Not that we have been enemies in history, but there have been conflicts, the ups and downs of history. These are deeply rooted nations. I say this in China, in Europe; but when you say this to Americans, they do not understand.

Lau Kin Chi: There are tensions between bourgeois democracy and communism. Which would you say has more influence among the young generation?

Samir Amin: I do not know. To answer that question, we need to meet and talk to many people. My guess is that there is a wide range of positions among the young. Some are more radical. Some are from the lower middle class, and some from the upper middle class. They are homogeneous on three things: (1) social justice; (2) independent international policy; (3) democracy and respect of rights.

Lau Kin Chi: The Muslim Brotherhood was not a legal organization, yet the government tolerated it, and, in fact, it was complicit with the government. The state repressed the Communist Party and drove it underground. Were communist activities tolerated?

Samir Amin: The government has never tolerated the Communist Party. They have killed or imprisoned Communist Party members but have not eradicated them.

Lau Kin Chi: How have communist ideas been maintained?

Samir Amin: That is a long story. The communist movement has gone through stages. For a long time, Moscow limited it, and then the movement split into Maoists and Moscowites. Then they are back to confluence but without a full union. This is a long story. I have written about it in my memoirs.

Comparing China and Egypt

Wen Tiejun: It would be interesting to make a comparison between Egypt and China. In terms of economic indicators, Egypt does better than China. Its per capita GDP is USD 6,200 [IMF figure for 2010], and its economic structure is 50 percent services and 13 percent agriculture. Over 50 percent is urbanized. The way it has made its structural adjustment from the viewpoint of mainstream modernization theories is also "better" than China. The official unemployment rate is 9 percent and inflation is at 12.8 percent, which are much lower rates than those in China in the 1990s. However, according to the local people, the actual price index is over 30 percent, and the youth unemployment rate is over 30 percent. Hard livelihoods led to street politics.

Compared with Egypt, China's economy is highly insecure, due to its high dependency on imports: 50 percent of basic raw materials, energy and food, and 12 percent of grain. Its imports of sugar, fodder, soya beans, edible oil, cotton, rubber, and timber are estimated to be equivalent to the use of over 20 percent of China's arable land. Hence, the question is not, will we have to bear the cost transfer of the global economic crisis? We are already deeply embedded in it. The question is, just how much are we going to bear?

The countries now struggling against globalization are countries that do not have the institutional-formation power of global governance, or the price-setting power of the flow of key global factors, or the power of intervention by hegemonic politics. And they are developing countries. The problem is, most of the intellectuals in developing countries are pragmatic followers of Western social sciences, and the post–cold war rhetoric continued from pragmatism can only be rightist. This causes the research on the global crisis in developing countries to be stagnant, and it cannot explain the turmoil.

Lau Kin Chi: What would you say to those who think China might be in the global crisis?

Wen Tiejun: Contrary to the situation in the 1990s, the countries in greatest debt are developed countries, the worst being the United States, Britain, and Japan. Their tacit strategic understanding is that government credit can continue to expand without the need for repayment. Japan's debt rate is over 200 percent; the debt rate of the United States and Britain is over 100 percent. EU countries face a similar situation, with Italy around 170 percent, and others around 60 to 80 percent. Capital shifts all the costs to the developing countries.

It is not possible for a small country to counter such pressure by its domestic policies. China, as a superlarge continental country, may be able to. The impact on developing countries would first be on single-product, small countries. The second round would affect countries importing resources, energy, and raw materials, such as China and India. Of the BRIC countries, Brazil and Russia may encounter problems at a later stage, since they have both a manufacturing sector and resources. Hence, one cannot exclude the possibility of turmoil erupting in China when the cost transfer of the global crisis negatively affects it.

Lau Kin Chi: How do you think the so-called China experience can point to alternatives relevant for developing countries?

Wen Tiejun: China's institutional experience over the last sixty years is its successful internal transfer of the urban crisis to the rural. The main reasons why China has not had to deal with massive starvation and has remained basically stable for half a century are, firstly, that the negative externalities from the early stage of primitive accumulation of capital for industrialization and the middle stage of expansion of industrial capital are borne by domestic rural society. This is internal transfer of institutional cost. The impact on the rural from this cost transfer is the decay of the villages, the impoverishment of small peasants, and a whole series of difficulties for agricultural security. If not for China being a vastly diverse country unified for twenty-five hundred years, the severity of the cost transfer would have caused great turmoil. Secondly, China survived the 2008–2009 global economic crisis mainly because the government had, in the previous three years, massively expanded investments in rural infrastructure and formed a second capital pool at levels below the county, and at the same time consolidated the rural labor pool. When twenty-five million workers became unemployed in the first quarter of 2009, there was not great turmoil, because the government absorbed much of this labor by investment in new rural

development. Not only traditional agriculture but also contemporary new rural development has positive externality for stabilizing rural society and the entire society. Now, politicians and intellectuals emphasize agricultural modernization and urbanization, but these radical policies have the problem of massive negative externality directly threatening state security.

Some research finds that in the last sixty years, urban capital has extracted USD 2.64 trillion from the rural. Government reformist measures in recent years have put around USD 0.46 trillion toward the rural in order to strengthen the positive externality of rural society in bearing the costs of the crisis. Thus, in confronting the challenges brought on by the global crisis shifting its costs to China, there should be strengthened inputs into the agrarian sectors. China should not radically go for Western modernization.

Samir Amin: Be careful: Egypt's and the World Bank's figures are meaningless. In fact, deep poverty is more widespread and visible in Egypt than in China! Growth during the last twenty years in Egypt has benefited only a handful of billionaires. The middle classes have not benefited from it. In China, the middle classes have continuously expanded in number and wealth. Not in Egypt.

Wang Hui: Do you think the Egyptian people can complete the "strong transition," and if so what sort of corresponding measures are the people to take? What are your views on future political changes in Egypt?

Samir Amin: It is a long process, and I do not know how this transition will continue, or if the government will give more concessions to the opposition. What I can say is that Egypt is a country of long revolutions. The people are accustomed to it. The 1920 revolution continued for thirty years before the Nasser compromise. Everybody knows that in Egypt we shall continue the process of struggle until we have won.

Lau Kin Chi: I agree that we should take the perspective of the people's revolution as a long process, with defeats in battles and wars over a long period, but the eruptions will come with more frequency and intensity, given the gravity of domestic and global crises. I would take this perspective with regard to assessing the so-called success or failure of the Chinese Revolution. Moreover, I believe any perspective for the future depends on our reflection of the past.

Samir Amin: When I was in the street in Cairo, I went up to a group of young people. I said, "I am an old communist." They embraced me and said, "Then we have a lot to learn from you. We want to listen to you for hours." They are ignorant of history but have sympathy for the communists. Therefore, I talked to them for three hours. In that huge building of the Syndicate of Journalists, they asked for my assessment of Nasserism, of this and that, what was the position of the Communist Party . . . There is a new wave of people, new technologies for getting information; they want to speak of the past.

History, for our generation, was taught from a leftist, progressive point of view of society. Now people are brainwashed completely. I wrote a paper on the forty years of British occupation. For people of my generation in Egypt, it was common knowledge, with a progressive vision—not necessarily Marxist. Now, it is absolutely ignored in school. During the thirty years of Mubarak's rule, the US embassy redrafted all the history books, and Egyptian history is but a caricature. The young people at the building of the Syndicate of Journalists asked me to speak on Egyptian history—people are aware that they are completely ignorant.

The youth are coming out of a dictatorship and brainwashing of forty years. It is good that they feel they cannot ignore their own history. There have been books published fifty years ago on our history, which are not outdated.

We are working to build an archive. It is an enormous job. We already have three volumes, each a thousand pages, on the history of the Communist Party of Egypt, for the period from 1942 to 1954. There will probably be three more volumes for the subsequent years. First, we collect documents, pamphlets, declarations. Second, we have seven volumes of testimonies. Third, we have two hundred CDs of oral memories of the working class who do not write. That gives us an enormous collection. In addition, we have written debates, up to last year, just before the revolution. Now we have a proliferation of things: interviews, articles in newspapers. We should be able to produce alternative perspectives.