

RELEASE IN PART B6

From: Sidney Blumenthal <[REDACTED]>
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B6

<http://www.nsfwcorp.com/dispatch/rejection-is-rejection>

From: Max Blumenthal
TO: The Egypt Desk
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The Revolution Will Not Be Marginalized: Max Blumenthal Reports From Egypt's Counter-Counter-Revolution

CAIRO, EGYPT: Inside a colonial era mansion that served as the headquarters of the liberal Wafd Party, I angled for position among the cluster of reporters seated awkwardly, like kindergarteners, on the dust-sodden, carpeted floor.

From the back of the room, cameramen bellowed "Sir! Sir! Ma'am! Sit down! Down!" jostling for position as Mohammed El-Baradei shuffled briefly across the stage. As the crowd of reporters surged forward, Baradei hurried behind two giant wooden doors and into a back room.

Baradei was the most prominent of the politicians gathered under the umbrella of the National Salvation Front (NSF), a coalition of Egyptian parties united against President Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood's divisive draft constitution.



Joining Baradei in the coalition was Dignity Party leader Hamdeen Sabahy, a former presidential candidate, longtime dissident and left-wing Nasserist. Amr Moussa, a liberal former Mubarak regime official and ex-Arab League chairman was welcomed into opposition ranks despite bearing the oppressive aroma of the ancien regime. And then there was Ayman Nour, the centrist politician jailed by Mubarak in 2005, filling out the roster of political heavyweights assembled under the banner of the NSF.

While a crowd of young party officials and cameramen piled microphones on the podium at the front of the room, I chatted with a few of the reporters seated beside me on the floor. None of them expected the opposition to keep up its boycott of the referendum scheduled for December 15, when Egyptians would go to the polls to vote on Morsi's proposed constitution. The conventional wisdom held that they were set to lose by a wide margin against a Muslim Brotherhood machine that boasted unmatched political discipline and a massive base in the rural provinces. Backed into a corner, the opposition seemed to have only one viable option: an aggressive campaign to convince the public to vote "no."

After an hour of waiting, NSF spokesman Hussein Abdel-Ghani appeared at the dais with a short, stentorian announcement: "Rejection is rejection," he proclaimed. The opposition would boycott the referendum until its three most ambitious demands were fulfilled: First, they wanted the referendum vote to be postponed; second, they insisted on the revocation of Morsi's decree granting himself unlimited power over the judiciary; and finally, they called for the draft constitution to be completely scrapped. It was December 9, only six days before the scheduled vote.

Not only would the NSF turn its back on the referendum, its members vowed to obstruct the vote through sit-ins and other unnamed methods of civil disobedience. "We are going to escalate our actions," Abdel-Ghani said, warning that the referendum was "a recipe for violence." The Brotherhood had used "terrorism" against supposedly peaceful demonstrators, he claimed, referring to the Roxy Square clashes last Wednesday that left 8 dead and hundreds injured, and which witnessed heavy violence from both sides. Now the opposition pledged to bring the heat, sending waves of demonstrators into the streets until Morsi and the Brotherhood buckled.

"This is a revolution and we will use the same methods as we did against Mubarak," Abdel-Ghani declared from the podium.

Despite its purported embrace of the revolutionary spirit emanating from the streets, the opposition distanced itself from the message uniting the protesters who convened outside the Itehadeya Presidential Palace each night -- "Leave!" -- blaming the calls for Morsi's ouster on the frustrations of disenfranchised Egyptian youth. The NSF's inability to fully embrace the fervor of the demonstrations suggested that it was the street leading opposition politicians, and not the other way around.

While the NSF sought to present a united front, rifts were beginning to appear. Ayman Nour had met privately with Morsi and the Brotherhood's Wizard of Oz-like supreme leader, Khairat El-Shater, agreeing to engage in the constitutional dialogue the rest of the opposition staunchly rejected. Nour's freebooting embarrassed other NSF leaders, prompting his branding as a rogue and a sellout, while Bahaa Anwar Mohamed, a member of Nour's OfGhad party's high committee, told me the party was considering moves to eject Nour from its ranks.

Two hours after the press conference, I was among the demonstrators assembled outside the presidential palace. In the four nights after the deadly Roxy Square street battle, the protests had taken on a festive, family friendly atmosphere, with demonstrations filled with an entirely new class of participants, including members of the old establishment who looked upon the original Tahrir Square revolution with suspicion and scorn. From the Gezira Club, a private riverside sports club, marches filled with well-coiffed Cairene elites have poured into the Itehadeya rallies, with some first-time demonstrators asking veteran activists for instructions on how to protest. Other loyalist strongholds like the neighborhood of Abbaseya have contributed heavily to the anti-Morsi forces.

Throughout the January 25 revolution that toppled Mubarak in 2011, the conspiratorial satellite TV demagogue Tawfiq Okasha assailed the demonstrators in Tahrir Square as foreign puppets bribed by US and European interests. The message resonated among both lower class nationalists and members of the genteel upper middle class. Now that members of the old establishment were protesting alongside the original revolutionaries, Egyptian political identity was in flux.

"I used to recognize everybody at these demos," Gigi Ibrahim, the 26-year-old Tahrir veteran and blogger, told me. "Now it's filled with new faces. A whole new sector has come out into the streets." Ibrahim was excited about the possibilities presented by the new breed of protesters. "These people used to say we were a bunch of foreign agents, and now they see that we are just people like them, and they can respect what he have really been doing since the beginning."

Since the presidential palace became the ground zero of anti-government protests, the vendors and graffiti artists familiar to Tahrir Square began a steady migration to the grass-lined boulevard outside its walls. The palace's outer facade was covered in graffiti, and large banners hung before its facade displaying slogans like, "Morsi hold back your thugs." "Game Over," another banner declared, invoking the famous photo of a Tunisian protester displaying the slogan on a cardboard sign the day before the fall of dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

The soldiers posted outside the palace had become part of the carnival scene, posing for photos with beaming young men, even playing checkers with demonstrators on the chassis of their tanks. Once a

symbol of iron-fisted repression, the army was suddenly received by opposition elements as the guarantor of civil society's security against Brotherhood aggression.

Inside a makeshift "museum of the revolution" installed on the grass across from the palace, next to the line of protest tents, I met Hossam Fares (below), a dapper businessman in his early 40's working as the political marketing director for Baradei's Dosta Party. Fares was working the youthful crowds milling about the tent, passing out fliers that outlined the constitution's most contentious articles and urging everyone to vote against it. The following day, Dosta planned to blanket private Egyptian television networks with commercials promoting a "no" vote.



"We're campaigning unofficially because we know first of all that we want the boycott," Fares told me. "However, some people will not listen to us, and to those people we're going to explain them why they should understand the constitution is a lousy product."

With its supposedly "unofficial" push for voting against the constitution, elements in the opposition were already participating in the referendum they rejected and claimed to be boycotting. Finally, on December 12, the NSF ended the rejectionist charade, throwing its political apparatus into full campaign mode just three days before the referendum was to take place. But with 90 percent of Egyptian Judges Club members refusing to supervise the voting, leaving only 7000 judges to preside over some 14,000 polling places, it was unclear how the vote could happen anyway.

The past week has been marked by attacks carried out on Muslim Brotherhood party headquarters across Cairo by the nationalist football hooligans known as the Ultras. As the street muscle of the opposition, the Ultras seemed intent on fomenting enough destabilization to topple the presidency. In the early morning two nights ago, I watched young men armed with pistols and clubs pour out of Tahrir Square, clashing with apparent Muslim Brotherhood attackers half a block from my hotel. By stepping back from the boycott and calls for "escalation," the NSF may have tamped down on the chaos in the streets, preventing a possible intervention by the army.

Until the zero hour of the referendum, confusion reigned. And the opposition was making up its strategy as it went along. "We are businessmen without many years of political experience," Hesham Elaiwy, a Dostor councilor representing the Heliopolis and Nasser City areas of Cairo, told me. "Some of us read about politics but we have never done it before now."

As the last protesters trickled out of the presidential palace demonstration, a group of young people gathered around a DJ playing revolutionary tunes and rallied their spirits for the struggle ahead. I followed Fares out of the protest area with two journalistic colleagues, walking past a makeshift checkpoint and around a giant concrete wall installed by the army to obstruct street clashes. A few minutes later, we were ensconced in the leather interior of Fares' BMW 5 Series, cruising into central Cairo to the sound of Joe Cocker grunting out soft rock ballads.

"This is gonna take quite some time," Fares remarked. "You have an organization of people in the Brotherhood who want to enforce their ideas on the whole population. They believe they are doing something for the good of their religion, and the good of their beliefs, so they won't give it up. And we won't accept it. So it will be a long struggle."

Fares dropped us off on 26 July street, the central artery of Cairo's affluent Zamalek district, a mecca for Western expatriates and cosmopolitan Cairene youth. Within the radius of a few blocks of crumbling, soot-stained pavement were dozens of trendy bars, cafes, and boutique shops. We searched out a place for a drink after the long day, but could only find one that was still serving. It was L'Aubergine, an upscale French bar and restaurant officially boycotted by local social justice activists for its refusal to allow veiled women through its doors.

Near the back of the bar, we spotted a friend who worked for a separatist Basque newspaper drinking with a prominent hammer-and-sickle tech guru who had earned international renown during the heady days of the Tahrir Square revolution. I seated myself nearby, ordered a plate of crabmeat ravioli and sipped on a Johnny Walker Black, doing my best to tune out the heated argument Marxist theory that had suddenly erupted at their table. "Workers aren't going to lead the revolutionary struggle," the

Egyptian activist insisted. "The inspiration is going to have to come from the intellectuals, the creative class."

On opposite walls of the low-lit bar, flatscreen TV's displayed footage of male models strutting down the catwalk of a European fashion show in tight, pleated slacks and weird insect glasses. Beneath a soundtrack of generic techno thumping from the speakers installed in the ceiling, the revolutionary's American accented voice bellowed across the bar -- "and that's why I'm a Leninist!"



Photographs: Max Blumenthal