

## **Weaving Revolution: Harassment by the Egyptian Regime**

**Austin Mackell**

### **Beginning with a postscript**

On 11 Feb 2012, a year to the day after Mubarak's downfall, my friend Derek Ludovici - a post graduate student working on the Egyptian labour movement – and I – accompanied by my long term translator Aliya Alwi and our taxi driver Zakaria Ahmed - travelled back to Mahalla. I had long been hoping to again speak with Mr Kamal el-Fayoumi about the labour and revolutionary movements' successes and failures over the year. In part, that interview was going to be used to update the article that appears below as I was in the process of finalising this note for *Interface* journal. What's more, a small national network of leftist students and workers had called for a general strike. Mahalla seemed an obvious place to spend the day.

We arrived in the town around noon, and went to meet Mr el-Fayoumi in the town's main square — the site of Mahalla's most famous uprising. Upon emerging from the car and beginning to exchange "allekoums" and "sallams" with Mr el-Fayoumi and a young man from an Egyptian TV crew who had had the same idea as us, we were set upon by a group of men.

The angry group came out of nowhere shouting at us, calling us spies, and Aliya a traitor and worse. We made an attempt to escape but the car ended up surrounded by an ever-growing, and ever more aggressive mob. It is very likely these people were mostly there of their own volition, as many Egyptians have accepted the story that further strikes and protests are part of a foreign plot to destroy Egypt. It would be surprising however, if at least some of the henchmen of the local strongmen weren't present in the square that day.

Our taxi driver unfortunately got out of the car, attempting to reason with the crowd — one of whom he told us later, was threatening to smash the car's windows with a brick. When he got back in he told us he had handed over his licence and it was now in the hands of a policeman who had emerged. He and other officers cleared a path and took us to a police station. We were then held for a total of 56 hours in a variety of facilities operated by the Gharabiya Governorate Police, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Justice, and Military Intelligence. During this time Aliya, Derek and I were charged with inciting people to vandalism. Specifically it is alleged we promised to give money to children if they threw rocks at a police station. The charges remain with the prosecutor's office at the time of writing. It seems the Ministry of the Interior documents centre is holding up progress, which, my lawyer is told, is comprehensively copying everything I own as part of the case against me. This has made me concerned for the safety of my sources. Already I have heard that one man, a dissident police officer who had declared his loyalty to Tahrir Square

(despite being rejected by the revolutionaries) was questioned about his connection to me when harassed by the authorities.



(From left to right) Derek Ludovici, Aliya Alwi, Austin Mackell, Zakaria Ahmed. Police, following our arrest in Mahalla, took this photograph inside a police station. It was then passed to state media, which ran stories about foreign saboteurs and spies having been arrested.

However, my colleagues and I are not the real targets of these charges. They have been concocted as part of a continuing effort to discredit the revolution and further protest actions, in particular strikes, as part of foreign plots against the country's sovereignty and stability. This narrative already has more than a little traction. When, on the day of the planned strikes, the 'honourable citizens' of Mahalla placed two foreign agents and their Egyptian lackeys under citizens' arrest, it was too good a headline to give up. The story continued in the Egyptian press for about a week or so. After the police raided my apartment it was reported that I possessed union pamphlets, books about Hezbollah, and even a collection of Nasrallah's speeches (a present from my father). We even heard reports that our case was raised by one of the defendants in the Mubarak trial as part of the elaborate foreign plot to overthrow him; the same plot that was responsible for the deaths of protesters, rather than the snipers working on his orders! Apart from adding to their propaganda effort, our case also served to further discourage the press, particularly the foreign press, from travelling outside Cairo, Alexandria and other relatively safe zones. This will help push the story of the labour movement of Egypt even further under the radar.

The Feb 11 strike was a dismal failure unfortunately. When I did get a chance to interview Mr el-Fayoumi (handcuffed to him in the back of a police truck, about 24 hours into our captivity) he had little good news. Having been in telephone contact most of the previous day, he said that the strike action in Mahalla had garnered little support, no more than five or ten per cent of the workers had participated. It is possible the number was even less. What's more, it is also

possible that the mob that had set upon us was in fact in the square as a counter protest to the strike march that was also planned.

This lack of enthusiasm was echoed around the country. It is not that the workers are anti-strike — strikes continue in overlapping waves. However they are largely organised by profession, industry - or even more commonly - around a specific workplace. The workers are not interested in uniting to use their labour power as a force in national politics, in places where those that voted, voted for the Muslim Brotherhood, the salafis, or other non-leftist parties. Indeed other Mahalla workers — including those involved in and even leading strike action previously — have criticised people like el-Fayoumi, calling for them to return to the official unions, citing leadership changes within.

Such voices seem, for this moment, to have the upper hand in the Egyptian workplace. Given the financial and other advantages the old unions have over the new unions, the balance seems unlikely to shift quickly, if it does at all. That does not mean the independent unions have been completely unsuccessful. By their very existence they have incentivised change within the old union structures, and they will continue to remain an important voice in Egyptian politics.

It's also worth noting that if any substantial neo-liberal structural readjustment programs are attempted — as currently being contemplated in talks with the International Monetary Fund - things may change quickly. The thrust of the labour movement, however, seems less revolutionary now than it did a year ago, when the hated figures of Mubarak and his circle were there to unify them with students, unemployed youth and other slum dwellers, peasants, Islamists and every other substantial current in Egyptian politics in collective disgust.

*Editor's note: The interview that follows first appeared in an Italian eBook, and is reprinted here as part of our Arab Spring issue. While we do not usually reprint previously published material, the unusual circumstances in this situation warrant it. We are grateful Mr Mackell has written this postscript at what is a very difficult time.*