

Commentary, March 15, 2018

## THE EGYPTIAN OPPOSITION'S LONG NIGHT

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Seven years after the popular uprising that led to the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak, political activism continues to play the prominent role it had in the 18-day anti-regime demonstrations (25 January - 11 February 2011) and the subsequent democratic transition, which soon got stuck.

According to the latest data released by Amnesty international, between April and September 2017, 240 secular political activists and nearly 500 close to the Muslim Brotherhood were arrested in Egypt. Human Rights Watch points out the shutdown of hundreds of blogs and websites critical of the Abdel Fattah al-Sisi presidency. Now, a few days before the presidential vote on March 26, the repression of dissent rages throughout the country using every means. Because of intimidations, arrests, political trials, forced disappearances and anti-terrorism rules, free voices face endless obstacles. The stories of all these people are emblematic of an entire generation who believed that in Midan Tahrir, the heart of the rebellion in Cairo, they could change the course of history.

Alaa Abd al-Fatah, the creator of "Manalaa", a platform of Egyptian blogs conceived together with his wife Manal Hassan, has been in jail since winter 2013-2014. Politically active since he was a teenager, the son of a university professor and a lawyer, Alaa had already been arrested in 2006 for organizing demonstrations against the Egyptian judicial system. But the al-Sisi presidency settled accounts with him: in 2015 Alaa was sentenced to 15 years for violating, in November 2013, the anti-demonstration rules imposed by the armed forces after the removal of Mohammed Morsi. The sentence was then converted into 5 years, but the Supreme Court, by virtue of continuous procedural delays, has not yet pronounced definitively and four years have already passed. The *#FreeAlaa* campaign not only did not have the desired effect, but was "frozen" by the authorities on Twitter.

Ahmed Maher, a civil engineer who founded the April 6 Youth Movement, the most famous and charismatic of the groups that emerged at the end of the Mubarak era, was freed at the beginning of 2017, but national security still keeps a special eye on him. Born

in support of the workers of the Mahalla al-Kubra textile factory, on strike in April 2008, the Movement (Haraka) was able to make the most of Facebook, Twitter and the blogs of the workers themselves to relate hard days of clashes between workers and police. At the forefront in 2011, subsequently the April 6 activists never ceased to be in opposition even in the post-Mubarak period: in the autumn of 2013 they denounced the return of the military dictatorship and the harsh repression of Islamism. Maher, like Alaa al-Fatah, was arrested and tried at the end of 2013. He served all three years to which he had been sentenced. Currently, he is trying to resume his public activity, but other members of the Movement, split in two and declared illegal, were arrested between the end of 2017 and the beginning of 2018.

Among the Egyptian dissidents there are also those who, scarred by too many battles, have chosen to move abroad. One of them is Ayman Nour, founder of the al-Ghad party (The Tomorrow, 2004) and challenger of Hosni Mubarak in the 2005 elections, to whom he came in second.

Accused of falsifying signatures for the registration of his party, the lawyer spent several years in prison until 2009, when he was released for health reasons. And in October 2011 he founded the party Ghad al-Thawra (The Tomorrow of the Revolution), leaving his first political "creature" to his successor Moussa Mustafa Moussa (pro-government, the only contender of al-Sisi for the presidency).

Nour also tried to run for the 2012 presidential elections, without success. He has been living between Turkey and Lebanon since the *coup d'état* of 2013, but does not stop criticizing the totalitarian drift. He was recently suspended by the Egyptian journalists association and

has risked losing his citizenship several times.

The call for a boycott ("Stay at home" is the campaign slogan) of the presidential elections brings together all the faces of the Egyptian opposition who still have a voice: the liberal party al-Doustour (The Constitution) as well as the Nasserist's al-Karama (The Dignity), the Egyptian Social Democratic Party and the moderate Islamist party of Misr al-Qawiya (Strong Egypt). In particular, Abd al-Moneim Abu al-Fotouh, the head of Strong Egypt, called for a national boycott. A doctor and former Muslim Brotherhood member, he is also known for his ability in dialogue - a quality that has earned him some enemies in the Brotherhood. Al-Fotouh was stopped by the police on February 14 and accused of making false and damaging statements against President al-Sisi, speaking with the British press during a stay in London. Likewise, Mohamed Abd al-Latif Talaat, general secretary of the al-Wasat party (The Center, moderate liberal Islamists) has been in custody since 9 February.

An opponent of Mubarak, Morsi and al-Sisi, the liberal Mohammed Esmaa Anwar al-Sadat, nephew of the president killed in 1981, was expelled from parliament a year ago and was recently "persuaded" not to run in the presidential elections.

The human rights lawyer Khaled Ali, a political activist, decided to withdraw from the election campaign on 24 January. Ezzat Ghonim, a prominent lawyer and activist, disappeared on March 1 while returning home from the headquarters of his NGO, the Egyptian coordinator for rights and freedoms.

Interviewed by *The Telegraph* in late January, Mohammed Esmaa Anwar Sadat said: "There is no political life any more. It's all dead. No one can dare to compete or even to speak out or challenge anything. It's not allowed".