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How to discredit your democratic opponents in Egypt

The Egyptian military regime is pushing conspiracy theories to discredit their democratic, non-violent opponents. Aiming at several birds with one stone, with respect to their US backers, they are trying to have it both ways at once. Democracy and non-violence will fight back.

The brutal crackdown on both Islamist and secular oppositionists by the US-backed Egyptian military junta has taken on a bizarre twist: using government-controlled media to promote long-discredited conspiracy theories originally put forward by ultra-left fringe groups.

Articles and broadcasts have falsely accused leading critics of the military regime—including progressive activist Ahmad Salah, the anti-authoritarian April 6th Movement, liberal intellectual Saad Eddine Ibrahim, former opposition candidate Ayman Nour, and Egyptian-American pro-democracy advocate Sherif Mansour—of having worked with Americans on a “new Middle East plan” for US domination.

In reality, these pro-democracy advocates were leading critics of the US-backed Mubarak regime and of US policies in the Middle East. Under such headlines as “April 6th behind an American plan to empower Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt,” the apparent goal of the regime is to discredit the nonviolent resistance tactics utilized by Egyptians in 2011 that brought down the Mubarak dictatorship and which has subsequently challenged military rule by insinuating that it was planned, instigated, and funded by the United States and other external actors.

What makes such charges so ludicrous is that the youthful oppositionists of the April 6th movement—who played a critical role in launching the uprising against Mubarak three years ago—not only strenuously opposed the Muslim Brotherhood during their year in power and were among the leaders of the anti-Morsi protests last summer which prompted the coup, but are decidedly leftist and anti-imperialist in orientation. Indeed, both April 6th and [Kefaya](#) can trace their origins to student groups organized in opposition to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq.

This is indicative of a growing paranoia by a government which, in recent weeks, has arrested and charged foreign journalists for supporting terrorists by allegedly falsifying videotapes of government repression, detained a stork which had been fitted by an ornithologist with a tracking device, apparently suspecting it was being used for spying, and investigated a hand puppet from a popular children’s television show on suspicion that it was sending coded messages for oppositionists. [Ziad Akl](#), a political analyst at the Al Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, noted that such behavior reflects “a sentiment of fascist nationalism that you either subscribe to, or face being labeled a traitor.”

During the Cold War, right-wing governments in various countries would routinely accuse progressive democratic oppositionists of being willing tools of Moscow with the aim of establishing Soviet-style communism. With no Soviet Union and very little communism to worry about, today’s autocrats are forced to put the blame on the United States, the world’s only remaining superpower, even when they themselves depend on American aid. While there are legitimate criticisms of certain US policies in the Middle East, the Obama administration has unjustly found itself being simultaneously accused by the military regime and its supporters

for bringing the Muslim Brotherhood to power and by the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters for being behind the military coup that ousted them.

Charges relating to Egypt

Essentially, the Egyptian military is trying to have it both ways: accepting \$1.5 billion in annual assistance from the US government while playing the pseudo-nationalist card for the Egyptian masses.

The regime, somehow hoping that Egyptians will forget the decades of unconditional US support for Mubarak's dictatorship and backing its repression of Islamist dissidents, is now attempting to make the case that the United States actually conspired to overthrow Mubarak to bring the Muslim Brotherhood to power. Indeed, dismissing the indigenous origins of Islamist movements throughout the region, an article in the semi-official newspaper *Al-Ahram* goes so far as to claim that former President Jimmy Carter's national security advisor was "the mastermind behind the establishment of Al-Qaida and Hamas."

As part of this effort to blame the United States for homegrown movements, pro-military writer and political analyst [Amro Amer](#) asserts in *Al-Dostoor* that the Egyptian 2011 pro-democracy protests were part of a US government plot "to dismantle the strongest Arabic armies" which began with the invasion of Iraq, and later shifted to "nonviolent wars."

Amer also claims that "the main instruments to wage those wars are the books and publications of [Gene Sharp](#) and [Peter Ackerman](#)," that "Gene Sharp's book is a book to overthrow Egypt," and "those political activists in Egypt are following the book of Gene Sharp and trying to create chaos and break the rules."

In reality, neither author has ever written about nor been part of any plot to "create chaos," "overthrow Egypt," or "dismantle the strongest Arabic armies," nor has either advocated "nonviolent wars" on behalf of US hegemonic interests. Neither has ever been part of the US government. Their largely academic writings have primarily analyzed the history of [civilian-based nonviolent movements](#) around the world in support of human rights, social justice, and democracy. What the Egyptian junta may actually fear is that such movements have often been successful at placing militaries under civilian control. Some individual Egyptian activists had likely read some of the works of Gene Sharp—as they presumably had read some writings of Antonio Gramsci, Herbert Marcuse, Sun Tzu and other thinkers—but it was they themselves who developed the strategies and tactics applicable to the Egyptian situation.

In another [Al-Dostoor article](#), military regime advocate Salma Hashim claims that "Ackerman founded the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict in the United States which trained several members of the April 6th movement including Ahmad Salah." In reality, [ICNC](#) never "trained" anyone belonging to that or any other movement. Ahmad Salah was one of 40 civil society leaders from over 30 countries admitted to the 2010 Fletcher Summer Institute for the Advanced Study of Nonviolent Conflict, a post-graduate course at Tufts University which ICNC helped to organize. It was an academic course which did not include anything resembling "training" nor was there any material covered in the institute directly relating to Egypt. (I was among the faculty for that course, along with such other left-leaning scholars as [Howard Barrell](#), [Cynthia Boaz](#), Janet Cherry, and [Stellan Vinthagen](#), as well as the Rev. James Lawson and journalist [Al Giordano](#), all of whom have been outspoken critics of US intervention in the Middle East and elsewhere.)

Claims of being part of a broader conspiracy

To bolster its false claims against Egyptian pro-democracy activists, the right-wing military regime has apparently borrowed from the script of various conspiracy theorists from around the Internet—many of whom, ironically, identify with the far left—to make the case that virtually all popular civil society movements against dictatorial regimes in recent years are part of a US plot.

Asserting that a shadowy group of American advocates of nonviolent resistance were responsible for the popular uprising against Serbian strongman Slobodon Milosevic in 2000, pro-regime analyst Amro Sombol was interviewed on a major television talk show and quoted in *Al-Dostoor* claiming that “Peter Ackerman...was one of the main supporters of the organization ‘Otpor’...and was one of its biggest funders.” In reality, Ackerman’s only interaction with Otpor was appearing in a public forum with former members of the group two years *after* Milosevic’s ouster, and he never provided financial or other support for the movement. Sombol goes on to claim that Otpor then “guided and facilitated the establishment of the April 6th movement,” despite the fact that [Otpor](#) folded in 2003 and the April 6th movement wasn’t established until 2008.

Indeed, just as the US government during the Cold War claimed that the various popular leftist uprisings around the world were actually engineered from Moscow as part of a [Soviet “hit list,”](#) the semi-official [Al-Ahram](#) newspaper dismisses the idea that “dictators can be overthrown from inside their own countries” since, “the CIA and the American media are the ones who can determine if this dictator is worth being overthrown.” For example, Ackerman is described as “the master planner of the soft wars and the engineer behind civil resistance and the Orange, Rose or Purple revolutions, or any other colors yet to come!”

Like other autocrats and their apologists, the Egyptian military cannot seem to fathom the possibility of local human agency in creating political change. For those raised in a hierarchical authoritarian mentality, popular uprisings could not simply be a result of unjust social conditions or a determination by an oppressed population to free themselves from corrupt despotic rule, but a conspiracy by foreign powers.

Even when corrupt and repressive regimes are removed from power by the ballot box, according to the Egyptian military’s supporters, it is somehow also the fault of a sinister foreign conspiracy. For example, a recent article in [Al-Ahram](#) claimed that the popular protests against massive fraud in the 2005 Ukrainian presidential election which forced authorities to call a new election that led to the defeat of the semi-autocratic incumbent party was not a reflection of popular will. Instead, according to the article, it was because the United States supposedly “paid voters and provided transportation to take them to voting centers or to support rallies” and was somehow able to provide government supporters with “invisible pens” which would cause their marked ballots to disappear and thereby make possible an opposition victory.

It was just these kinds of tactics, according to [Al-Ahram](#), that led to Morsi’s 2012 election victory in Egypt, which “gave these external powers the chance to meddle in our issues to preserve their interests, not ours.” What is so convenient for the Egyptian military is that such claims can then be used to give them tight control over the electoral process and prevent international observers from monitoring elections.

The nature of nonviolent struggle

For millions of Egyptians and others, the “Arab Spring” in Egypt challenged the sense of fatalism that had permeated generations of Arabs, many of whom had long resigned themselves to simply being the pawns of foreign powers and their own autocratic rulers. Popular nonviolent civil insurrections, such as those that brought down Hosni Mubarak in 2011, dramatically challenge this sense of victimhood, exposing how the state only has

power as long as people agree to obey. When a significant proportion of the population refuses to cooperate, it exposes the weakness of the regime and its forces of repression and reveals the ultimate power of the people.

Foreign intrigues can certainly make regime change possible through military invasions, coup d'états, and other kinds of violent seizures of power that install an undemocratic minority. In contrast, mass nonviolent movements, such as those which ousted Mubarak—along with scores of other dictators in recent decades—make regime change possible through empowering pro-democratic majorities. Indeed, the very nature of nonviolent movements—at least those which become large enough to threaten the survival of an autocratic regime—requires that they have mass popular support, build alliances from a broad cross-section of civil society, and employ massive noncooperation and other tactics that can only come from the people themselves.

The military regime's efforts to discredit grassroots civil society groups which, after many years of struggle, successfully organized and launched the popular uprising which ousted Mubarak, appears to be part of an effort to rewrite history to instead depict themselves as the legitimate heirs of the 2011 revolution.

The fact remains, however, that it was the military that kept Mubarak, himself a top-ranking military officer, in power for nearly three decades and their decision to remove him from office that February was more of a *coup de grace* than a *coup d'état*. They recognized that if they did not push Mubarak aside, they themselves would be challenged by the millions of Egyptians on the streets.

As a result, fearing that such activists could potentially pose a threat to their renewed grip on power, the military regime is now engaged in a desperate ploy to depict pro-democracy activists as being hirelings of foreign agents who somehow planned, instigated, and funded the 2011 revolution. While some congressionally funded institutions, like the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), have provided support for certain opposition groups in Egypt and a number of countries, NED and similar groups have tended to work with elite oppositionists and focus on institutional reform, not those engaged in strategic nonviolent action and other grassroots efforts which directly challenge autocratic regimes.

Sometimes elite oppositionists overlap with popular movements, but not usually. Indeed, while some opposition groups have accepted some US assistance, the mass movements in Egypt which spearheaded the democratic revolutions – such as Kefaya and April 6th – rejected such aid on principle.

It is ironic that a right-wing military dictatorship with such close ties to the US government would feel so inclined to put forward conspiracy theories which so closely parallel those of various far-left bloggers who identify as “anti-imperialists.” Indeed, it is very much of an imperialist mindset to assume that Arabs and other non-western peoples are somehow incapable of effectively organizing themselves into an effective social movement and could only do so if masterminded by a handful of Americans.

Whether such efforts to discredit popular democratic struggles comes from Marxist-Leninists or right-wing military officers, however, only those with an authoritarian mindset could depict the millions of Egyptians who put their bodies on the line for their freedom three years ago and have subsequently challenged both the Muslim Brotherhood and the military as simply pawns of foreign interests.

The Egyptian military clearly has the upper hand at this time, but their hold on power will ultimately prove fragile. The younger generation of Egyptians will not likely be satisfied with military rule any more than they were with Mubarak or Morsi. And they have witnessed the power of strategic nonviolent action in bringing down an entrenched repressive regime. It is doubtful, then, that government propagation of convoluted conspiracy theories apparently borrowed from the fringes of the internet will be enough to keep them quiet for long.