

Interview with Noor Ayman Nour

By Mark LeVine

Heavy Metal Islam author and *Before the Spring After the Fall* producer Mark LeVine caught up with Noor Ayman Nour, one of the main characters whose lives our film chronicled in the years before, during and immediately after the Tahrir revolution of January-February 2011. When Mark first met Noor in 2006, he was a teenage metalhead whose father, Ayman Nour, was rotting in an Egyptian jail after running against Hosni Mubarak in the 2005 presidential elections. Even then Noor had dreams both of becoming a great musician and helping to reshape his country's future. Mark was with Noor in Tahrir Square during the revolution, and has seen him many times during his frequent return visits to Egypt, during which time Noor completed his university education in law, was a primary organizer of the "No to Military Trials" movement, moved into environmental politics, and continued to develop into one of Egypt's leading prog rock musicians.



Mark asked him to discuss how Egypt, and his own involvement as an activist, have changed since the heady 18 days of revolution they both shared.

ML: How would you compare your activism now to the first revolutionary period, in January-February 2011.

NAN: I will be very honest. In comparison to my participation in previous events my participation in the the June 30 events is very reduced. In part this is because I'm so busy with my own work as an environmental activist and partly because of the way this latest protest movement has framed its actions. June 30 is clearly attempting to achieve the results of the revolution. We all are still demanding the same things we were chanting about when you filmed us in Tahrir so seemingly long ago: bread, freedom and social justice, and which justifies the stance against Mubarak, SCAF, and now Morsi. However, I'm also being very cautious not to fall into same trap of the army, that I am not supporting a military coup. Morsi was removed by a popular uprising, but this could turn into military coup, and it will be determined by what happens next. Take the violence against Brotherhood protesters, the news of which I just woke up to this morning (approximately 51 Brotherhood supporters were killed by troops at a confrontation at the Republican Guard headquarters). It's a fact that lots of these demonstrators are armed. However, the army does not deal with only armed demonstrators this way. Even our demos when we were not armed the army did the same thing. At Maspero they killed two dozen unarmed protesters. So how do we know who's to blame? The MB have committed a crime against Egypt by promoting the use of arms against Egyptians, but the army is using a lot of violence, so the problem is two-fold.

ML: How do we compare them?

NAN: The MB is to blame for allowing Egypt to reach this stage, for governing in a way that made this inevitable through its authoritarianism and unwillingness to work with others, and its incompetence. And the army is to blame for dealing with the situation in the way it has, and for continuing to use such violence and staying in power behind the scenes. My father was approaching this problem from a middle ground perspective, trying to get the two sides to act in the interest of Egypt but it couldn't happen.

We have a frightening ability to repeat history and this really scares me. We've taken history from a linear chronological object to a multidimensional cyclical object, where history repeats itself in cycles, but several cycles at the same time--long and short term--and they're all meeting now and they're all bad, reinforcing each other. The Egyptian people have seen so much over the last couple of years that our attention span is so reduced to what is happening right now and what our media /gov shows us. So we can't see how all these forces are working to make things even worse. But it's hard to be critical or think critically right now because people will call you a MB sympathiser. I used to be a hopeful person but to be very honest there's only so much we can do with words and writings. and we've reached a point where, how can we say it, "mat al-kalam," words have died.

ML: How about the music? Has it died to?

NAN: We just did a gig, with Sherine and Maseera in fact. It was good. The music is important. But in fact, we are doing our best not to fall into the trap of commenting on contemporary politics in such a way that makes our music temporary and only relevant now. We do our best to absorb everything that's happening to give the music a more permanent rather than short term perspective and significance, because music is not supposed to be limited to specific time and place. I hope that our music can be listened to by our kids and their friends some day and sound relevant, and not just from a specific moment long ago.

ML: How have some of the other main actors like the Ultras played a role in the current protests?

NAN: I haven't seen the ultras so much. They were there in the June 30 protests. I joined in one of the demos by the presidential palace with the ultras, where we were very very vocal about our objection to Morsi and the army/police, I think Ramy Essam's new song, "Aha" (which means something like the interjection "Shit!" in Arabic), right before June 30. He captures the situation well. "Aha ya bataha!" he sings, putting the whole system on trial.

ML: How have these protests felt, especially in terms of music and culture, compared to the Jan25 protests?

NAN: Compared with the 18 days there is an even greater variety of people today. you have a huge variety of people. Don't forget that the MB threatened the identity of Egypt itself by pushing a very partisan identity, whereas the military didn't threaten the very identity of the people, even though it posed the biggest threat to their political freedom. This is why even more people have come out for these protests. But the musicians and artists are there, even if not so many new ones.

ML: What are you working on now if you're not so involved in the present protests?

NAN: I work with the Nature Conservation Egypt (NGO), and I'm also starting work with a great company called Dayma Journeys (www.dayma.org). We are working on the environment. I have a new project working on migratory soaring birds. People don't realize that Egypt lies on the 2nd most important fly-way for birds in the world--the Red Sea Valley flyway. It has a huge potential for revenue from natural resources, particularly through birding tourism and related activities. But because of overdevelopment along the coast their well-being is threatened. We focus on this and try to remind people of their importance and are in fact coordinating with the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency. And this Ministry has been an exception to the government more broadly in that they're very cooperative and want to work to improve the environment, working on wind energy and tourism, etc.

ML: What's the most important or most troubling thing to understand about the protests now?

NAN: Perhaps most important, Egyptians have reached a point that we don't listen to each other anymore, where the loudest voices are the ugliest ones. People are willing to sacrifice their humanity because the MB sacrificed theirs. It's an ugly time, but we've gotten through worse and we'll eventually come together and hopefully move beyond this. We have no choice.