Title: Egypt at Crossroads: The Revolution in Question

Location: The New School, 2 W 13th Street, New York, NY

Date & Time: November 7, 2011 at 6:30–8:30 pm

Speakers: Shima’a Helmy, Human rights activist from Cairo, Egypt
Marie-Helene Carleton and Micah Garen, award winning filmmakers, Four Corners Media

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Event Summary:

Micah Garen, a filmmaker of Four Corners Media, who was in Cairo, Egypt from January 28, 2011 to October 13, 2011, introduced the main speaker Shima’a Helmy. Ms. Helmy is a 21 year-old Egyptian woman who holds a B.Sc. in Biotechnology and is a teacher of Arabic to non-native speakers. Mr. Garen stated that he met Ms. Helmy on February 21, 2011 in Cairo’s Tahrir Square during the protests. Mr. Garen then showed the audience a part of the film he took during the Egyptian uprising while Ms. Helmy commented on the events that were being shown.

Shima’a Helmy stated that Egyptian people were tired of the regime’s corruption, high cost of living, and the high unemployment rates in Egypt. She joined the protests on January 25, 2011 by creating a Facebook page calling people, especially women, to go to Tahrir Square and topple President Mubarak’s regime. Even though the Mubarak regime shut down the Internet and telephone services, Ms. Helmy said she and two other activists - Amr Abudulla and Khadiga Omar - mobilized women to come out and join the young men who were on the streets. She stated that from that day, thousands of Egyptian women joined the protests. She stated that she encouraged women to join in the protests because she believes that when a country is being led by corrupt leaders, it is the women and children who suffer most. She wanted women to take part in the protests to show how much they were suffering under President Mubarak’s regime.
When the internet ban was lifted, Ms. Helmy continued running the Facebook page she had created, informing people what was taking place in Cairo’s Tahrir Square. She stated that many women outside Cairo responded to her call to come out and join men in the demonstrations. The Egyptians were able to topple President Mubarak because they were united and had the same goal.

Asked to comment on what the Egyptians gained after the revolution, Shima’a Helmy stated that she is disappointed that Egypt is worst (both economically and politically) than it was when President Mubarak was still in power. After President Mubarak resigned, he appointed an army general, General Tantawi, to take over from him. Since the army took over leadership in Egypt, at least 12,000 civilians have been arrested and tried for inciting violence against the army. Out of the 12,000 who were tried, at least 8,000 were convicted and are serving their sentences in military jails where they are being tortured. Ms. Helmy said these civilians are being punished for taking part in the uprising. She communicates with some of the people who are being held in military detention, including Alaa Abd El Fattah. He was arrested for writing a blog in Arabic saying that the army was violating human rights.

Finally, Shima’a Helmy emphasized that Egyptians are not getting what they fought for because the army is now more brutal than it was under President Mubarak. The army still controls at least 30% of Egypt’s businesses, is still torturing people in military detentions, is arresting bloggers and journalists, and is controlling the media.

The event ended with a question and answer section. Shima’a Helmy was asked what she would ask from the United States and the international community at large. She responded that she would like to see the US revising its foreign policy, looking not only at its strategic interests in Egypt when giving Egypt aid, but also looking at what that money is being used for. She stated that the army is using the weapons that they buy with aid money from the US to oppress and torture people. The US should stop sponsoring and encouraging Egyptian army brutality (by giving Egypt huge amount of money which is not benefiting the public). Lastly, she is disappointed that the international community chose to support President Mubarak and not the Egyptian people.