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Case Analysis

EGYPT 2011: FROM MOVEMENT TO REVOLUTION

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Contents

Conditions for protest, dissent, uprising or revolt are universal and deal primarily with issues that affect people's daily lives and ultimately have a negative impact on quality of life of society. These objective conditions differ from one epoch to another, and, for the most part, are historically and culturally determined. Egypt 2010/2011 is no exception. However, the Egypt experience differs from other equally successful uprisings in a crucial area: the mass events that led to what is now known as the January25"revolution" had no known leadership, no written manifesto or platform. And in a very early and crucial period of the transition, following Hosni Mubarak's resignation as president under popular pressure, the mass of demonstrators had no representatives in the military council or in the government.

This "absent leadership" in Egypt is composed of a very loose coalition of young (mostly) men from different political, ideological, and social backgrounds. The early objective that unified them was this generation's yearning for freedom and improving the quality of life in the broadest sense of the term for the majority of Egyptians. These youth also shared a high level of discipline, persistence, and ability to set up modern forms of organization to achieve their objectives. They were free from the ideological divisiveness, egocentricity, and partisan dogma that characterized the relationship of the older generation of Egyptian politicians. This young leadership readily compromised when the exigencies of action on the ground demanded it and they never lost sight of the objective. Hence, the organization, in preparation for the 25th of January demonstration and subsequent events, succeeded immensely.

This generation of Egyptians is exposed and rooted in the modern era. It was only natural that they would use cyberspace to plan and coordinate activities, cement their organization, and mobilize. The *ancien regime* type, who thought they could achieve stability and secure the dynastic hold of the Mubarak regime by tightening the public space, were dealt a severe blow, for they had little knowledge of the internet – its applications and its reach. These young leaders did not operate in a vacuum. They were impacted by events that took place in Egypt and they sought to change them. For almost all of them their story begins with the "*Kifayah* Movement" in 2005.

The *Kifayah* showed them that you can be daring and you can speak out in public. Of course there is a price to be paid, but they did not mind. The boisterous debate on succession, along with small demonstrations in various places, mainly in the major cities, and the chanting of hitherto taboo slogans, were milestones in their political development.

Egypt as a society viewed the upper crust of the elite, within and outside the state, as corrupt and allied in the single objective of augmenting their wealth and power. Income inequality was evident everywhere, and the security apparatus were the protectors of this alliance rather than enforcers of the law. The securitization of the public sphere was nearly complete: security

services were everywhere, monitoring people and obstructing appointments to boards of major companies, as district governors and the higher levels of the bureaucracy were fully staffed with their people. The damage became more severe when appointment of university faculty was conditioned on security approval. These institutions of higher learning, whose task it is to produce young men and women equipped with skills to transform their societies for the better, devolved into organized institutions for ignorance with severe consequences on Egypt's human capital.

Furthermore, the police force in Egypt (estimated to be close to 500,000) was resented across the board for their brutality and maltreatment of the populace. It was a fierce force that tortured and abused citizens and in some instances people died under torture. Most importantly the police did not provide security as enforcers of the law. The vast majority of Egyptians suffered from their deficiencies and abuses. Mubarak's declaration of January 25 as Police Day, and a public holiday, came back to haunt him. The killing of Khaled Said, a young man who was tortured while in police custody in Alexandria, was the incident that rallied the young generation to action more than any other factor. His death also sparked the first online initiative to mobilize public support of more openness and democratization in much the same way that Mohamed Bouazizi, who set himself on fire in protest against the humiliation inflicted on him by a municipal official, became the catalyst that triggered the Tunisian Revolution a few weeks earlier. As subsequent developments showed, the nascent Egyptian movement has now taken the first steps on almost the same revolutionary course as its Tunisian counterpart by putting forward equally serious and growing demands in the social, political, and cultural fields.

The *ancien regime* occupied a parallel universe in isolation of the rest of Egyptian society, relying exclusively on the security forces to guarantee political stability from their perspective. They stopped at nothing to secure their victory in the 2010 parliamentary elections. Open vote rigging, fraud, wholesale buying of votes, and hooliganism used by the National Democratic Party (*Hizb Al Watani*), the ruling party, in collaboration with all segments of the Egyptian security forces, produced a parliament that was completely dominated by the NDP. The event was seen as an unpardonable insult to the people: all groups, political parties, established or nascent, felt excluded.

The unmistakable closing of the door to any possibility for political openness under the Mubarak regime was the straw that broke the camel's back. Thus, there was only one route to change left open to Egypt – regime change. However, it was not at all clear to the demonstration organizers that they were capable of forcing such a change, and so swiftly, nor did they aim that high initially. The pleasant surprise came January 25, when the crowds themselves began shouting "people want to bring down the regime". The chant echoed the popular rallying cry in Tunisia

against Bin Ali, and Egyptians, emboldened by the Tunisians, sought to emulate their experience.

PRE-JANUARY 25, 2011 ACTIONS

The young, patriotic, modern, and disciplined organizers did not plan the overthrow of the regime when they started the process of mobilization two years earlier. Driven by national rather than partisan, sectarian, ethnic or geographic issues, they achieved what no other party or group of people had achieved for decades – unifying the population and taking action on policies and programs. The regime's deliberate de-politicization of the population over years was to be upended by a small group of young leaders who seized an historic moment and unified the country through politics and national programs within the public space, thus laying down the process that would ultimately lead to a free Egypt.

It all started in the town of Al Mahala on April 6, 2008, when a group of activists decided to demonstrate in support of raising the minimum wage. The gathering was a relative success by their standards, and they decided to continue their political efforts. The activists' strategy after Al Mahala was to organize in small groups and demonstrate each time in a different low income neighborhood of the capital. The demonstrators' chanted slogans were always articulated to demands related to economic woes: the need for jobs for the unemployed, better distribution of income, etc. At certain demonstrations the organizers would distribute pamphlets highlighting economic issues. The response was not massive, but, nevertheless, was encouraging, according to the organizers.

Well aware of the power of the police and intelligence, the activists never revealed their plans in public or even to the early demonstrators who joined them. If a given event required 3 to 5 groups, for example, only the leader of each group would know the exact plan. They used the internet and changed their mobile phone numbers often. In one particular demonstration, a handful of leaders went to the locality where their demonstration was to take place a few days later, armed with a stop-watch. Once there, they calculated the exact time required to cross on foot from one area to another, determined how far the local police station was from the site of the demonstration, and predicted the directions of the flow of vehicle traffic to ensure that all their comrades would be able to escape any security force intervention. The event was a success: the demonstration took place, pamphlets were distributed, and some bystanders even applauded the young protestors; they all were able to escape.

Still, the January 25, 2010 demonstration in Cairo fell short of expectations– around a couple of hundred people came, met, chanted, and went home. The activists recognized they needed more organization; therefore, in preparation for the demonstrations of January 25, 2011, this young

cadre of activists held "rehearsal" demonstrations, mostly in small neighborhoods to mobilize for the larger one.

The internet was the medium of communication between the April 6th group, the Democratic Front Party, Justice and Freedom, the Khalid Said supporters, the Baradei campaign, the *Shabab Al Akwan*, and others. A very interesting group that joined this circle of political activists was the *Ultras* of *Al Ahli* and *Al Zamalek*, Egypt's popular football teams. The *Ultras* who number in the thousands, and were often manhandled by the police at games, were probably also eager to spoil the party for the police on Police Day. These boisterous, tough, organized football fans would play a crucial role in confronting the police as citizens flocked to Tahrir Square on January 25.

The leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood, along with other parties, did not participate in the January 25, 2011 event; however, the *Shabab Al Akwan*, who make up a sizeable percentage of the young brotherhood, decided to join forces with their secular colleagues, with whom they have been working since the Al Mahala event in 2008. What unified the organizers was an unwritten platform – the desire for a more democratic and just Egypt.

THE STATE RESPONSE

All political parties in Egypt, as well as all the top state hierarchy, never imagined that an event organized by unknowns with no declared political, social, or economic platform would mushroom into what it became. The Mubarak regime followed the script of a typical authoritarian regime – state violence; the only way to put down unwanted dissent. Hence, the police strategy was based on discouraging large gatherings and preventing crowds from reaching Tahrir Square. Crowd numbers were enormous, numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Citizens poured in from everywhere. Several other demonstrations began to erupt throughout Egypt's cities and large towns.

By the evening, people started arriving at Tahrir Square, and some police barricades began to be dismantled by the force of the crowds. The police ran out of tear gas canisters and rubber bullets. The state waited almost until midnight to again attack the crowds and evict these people of all social and economic backgrounds, with a majority of middle class. This act emboldened the demonstrators even further and fuelled more popular resentment towards Mubarak and his regime. The chants turned into "Down with the regime."

The unarmed young crowd, led by the *Shabab Al Akwan* and the *Ultras* fought back. A first tent was bought by one of the leaders of the April 6th movement and erected in Tahrir Square for what they felt should be the beginning of a process of taking over the square until their demands were met. Until the evening of January 25, their demands did not include the ousting of Hosni

Mubarak. Weeks later, after Mubarak's downfall, members of the young leadership stated that had Mubarak fired his minister of interior that evening; the demonstrators would have gone home and the young leadership would have felt that a great objective had been achieved, but this sense of "accomplishment" would have been short-lived in view of the structural deformities of the Mubarak regime. As witnessed, the state response made the protestors raise their demands.

After the January 25 event, there were spontaneous demonstrations all over Cairo and other cities in Alexandria, Suez, and elsewhere. This exerted pressure on the police to try to end the wave of mass demonstration and movement throughout Egypt. The demonstrators, now engaged with the police, were receiving advice from counterparts in Tunisia on how to manipulate the police, handle tear gas, etc.

Again, the regime's response was predictable: close down the channels of communication and organization. Telephone, mobile, and internet services were interrupted and curfews were imposed. Al Jazeera news network stepped in by broadcasting information about planned demonstrations on the satellite station's news bar, people resorted to digital media to communicate, and the crowds turning up to demonstrate swelled again.

The curfew, which the Mubarak crowd thought would help them control the situation, backfired. Banks were closed, businesses shut their doors, governors found themselves almost with nothing to do, and there was a collapse of the police force. Precisely because of the intensity of the demonstrations, and despite their own huge numbers, the police could not be of more help to the regime.

They were subsequently withdrawn, and the army was deployed. Egypt suddenly erupted with retaliatory violence aimed at the reviled symbols of the Mubarak regime. The headquarters of the ruling party were set aflame in downtown Cairo and other cities. Police stations were set ablaze, jails were stormed, and prisoners released. The freeing of *Hamas* along with *Hizbollah* prisoners suggests the work of organized groups who had a definite interest in liberating their comrades. However, the storming of jails was not limited to freeing political prisoners; other jails were raided, and convicted criminals fled. Some acts of violence and looting that took place in Cairo and other areas were blamed on the freed criminals. The people's response was quick and orderly. Neighborhood committees put an end to a process of violence against people and property that would have derailed the whole popular movement that led to Mubarak's downfall.

Then there was a moment after the second Mubarak televised speech, on February 10, when he generated some sympathy, and it appeared that there was a window of opportunity for the regime to split the opposition by starting a dialogue with some groups. The day after the speech, thugs on horseback and camelback clashed with demonstrators, attacking them with sticks and canes

and shouting pro-Mubarak slogans. In typical Egyptian humor, the event was coined "*Mawqiaat al Gimal*" – the Battle of the Camels, and will be recorded so in political history. The event, which took less than an hour, decimated whatever sympathy the crowds had left for the regime. Who these thugs were, where they came from, and who, if anyone, sent them, will be debated for many years.

After this incident, there was a country-wide sense that Mubarak's days as Egypt's leader were numbered. The young organizers throughout refused to accept the state's call for dialogue with Omar Suleiman. On the contrary, they raised their demands and the generation of young Muslim Brotherhood cadre who were involved in the country-wide demonstrations put tremendous pressure on their leadership to withdraw from the process of dialogue between the regime and the opposition initiated by Suleiman.

Mubarak's inner circle was composed of a handful of politicians who were not accountable to any elected body or to their institutions themselves. They were at the service of Mubarak, not the president, and had been giving him advice for almost a decade, providing him with self-serving counsel that eventually brought down Mubarak and his circle with him. In view of the fragmentation of the decision-making process of the state, the isolation of Mubarak and his cronies, the collapse of the police force, and the army's "neutrality," the state was now face to face not with a handful of organized young men who were willing to go all the way, but with what appeared to be the entire population rejecting the regime. Mubarak had to step down.

THE TRANSITION

Mubarak and his circle left the scene, but the state structures erected by Mubarak remain in place. The debate on the course of action for the future of the country is intense in Egypt. Although the military has appeared to be neutral, their insistence on a six-month transition period, after which presidential and parliamentary elections are to take place, has had two effects. The first is a strong, reassuring message from the military that it seeks no political role in the country. Linked to this, they are willing to amend the constitution to guarantee that the political process for electing a president and parliament will be fair and clean. The second was a fear that pro-democracy forces, old and new, believe six months is insufficient time to establish new political parties able to compete and have an impact. Except for a very few corrupt officials and businessmen, who were arrested following the military council's takeover (and who are now in jail awaiting trial), there has been no significant change yet in the composition of the elite. Antiquated restrictive laws and unwritten codes are still in place. For example, university presidents still abide by the old rule that no faculty member is to be appointed without security clearance. Almost all old governmental bodies are in place: the foreign ministry is still in tact,

governors still occupy their seats, and all Mubarak's hand-picked generals remain in service. Finally, Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq left office 20 days after Mubarak was deposed because of continuous pressure from below.

One of the issues being debated now in Egypt among intellectuals and state functionaries that begs the question "Where do you stand?" is what to call the historic events that took place at the beginning of 2011. The young generation of leaders, along with the masses who demonstrated, calls it a revolution. The state elite, inside and outside, call it a movement.

A revolution must involve a serious degree of structural and meaningful changes in the country's orientation, both in domestic policy and in foreign affairs. This is not yet the case in Egypt. If the country is to achieve a qualitative leap forward, pressure from below must be continuous, despite immediate economic loss and what appears to be anarchy. In the long run, a democratic Egypt will attract more Arab and foreign investment. With an expanded public space, independent media will flourish and a politicized society will produce politicians with platforms better than fragmented societies which produce parochial individuals and village elders. With a viable and vigorous parliament, the executive in Egypt will be made more accountable and efficient. A democratic Egypt will most certainly change the character of the region, and other regimes will feel a consistent and lasting pressure to change or suffer the fate of Ben Ali, Mubarak, and others still to come.

Once again, hope for change lies in the hands of the young leaders who initiated this process. The resignation of Ahmed Shafiq clearly shows that the demonstration organizers maintained their ability to both organize and mobilize hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, after Mubarak stepped down. It is also testimony to the fact that a small group of people armed with only their ideals, a clarity of vision, and determination can continue the process of transformation of Egypt into a democratic society.

**This article is based on interviews with many young leaders who organized the movement/revolution, existing political party leaders (including the Muslim Brotherhood), politicians of the former ruling party, members of the dissolved parliament, academics, journalists, and other activists during a field trip made to Cairo from February 19 to 25, 2011. The field trip was made in an attempt to reconstruct the Egyptian historic reality of the past several months.*