

People Power in Action

The Making of Egypt's Revolution

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*Freedom lies behind a door, closed shut
It can only be knocked down with a bleeding fist*
— Egyptian Poet-Laureate Ahmad Shawqi (1869-1932)

On April 21, 2008, an assistant high school principal placed an advertisement in Al-Ahram, the largest daily newspaper in Egypt, pleading disparately with President Hosni Mubarak and his wife to intervene and release her daughter from prison.

It turned out that her 27 year-old daughter, Israa' Abd el-Fattah, was arrested 10 days earlier because of her role in placing a page on Facebook encouraging Egyptians to support a strike in the industrial city of al-Mahalla that had taken place on April 6.

In her spare time, she and two of her colleagues created the Facebook page. Within days of posting it, over 70,000 people supported their call. After the security forces cracked down against the huge riots in al-Mahalla on April 6, Abd el-Fattah was arrested.

What was odd about this arrest was that although thousands of people have been arrested over the past three decades, it was the first time that a warrant was issued against a female under the notorious emergency laws imposed in the country since 1981. To get out of prison she had to apologize and express regret for her actions. But the experience made her more determined than ever to be politically active.

On that day, the "April 6 Youth" movement was created. For the next two and a half years it maintained its presence and created one of the most popular political forums on several social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr.

When the president of Tunisia, Zein al-Abideen Ben Ali, was deposed on January 14, following a four week popular uprising, the April 6 movement, like millions of youth across the Arab World, was inspired, energized, and called for action.

Changing of the Guard: the Youth leads

Looking at the calendar, Israa' and her colleagues picked the next Egyptian holiday, which was ironically "Police Day" falling on Tuesday, January 25. Within a few days they called on all social media sites for massive protests and an uprising against the Mubarak regime.

They called for marches to start from all major squares, mosques and churches in Cairo and Alexandria while asking others to help plan in other Egyptian cities. They insisted that the protests would be peaceful and that no one should bring weapons of any type.

They had four demands: that the government develops programs to address poverty and unemployment; that it would end the state of emergency and uphold judicial independence; the resignation of the interior minister whose ministry was notorious for torture and abuse of human rights; and for political reforms including the limitation of presidential terms to two, the dissolution of the parliament, and for new elections to be held after the massive elections fraud of last November.

Within a few days, over ninety thousand youth signed up and charted a comprehensive protest throughout Egypt. Initially, neither the government nor the opposition took them seriously. Even former IAEA director Dr. Mohammad Elbaradei, who has been criticizing the regime for over a year, was abroad due to his frequent speaking engagements.

In a show of force, the government assembled over two hundred thousand of its security forces surrounding the protesters throughout the country. On the other hand, hundreds of thousands of protesters marched representing broad cross sections of society, men and women, young and old, educated and illiterate, and declared that their demonstrations were peaceful but that they were determined to press their demands.

When they could not control the crowds the police beat back the protesters using water canons, tear gas and rubber bullets. By the end of the day there were over a dozen casualties and hundreds of injuries. This not only outraged the demonstrators, but also ignited the whole country.

Most of the protesters refused to go home and escalated the confrontation declaring an open demonstration in Liberation Square in downtown Cairo and throughout the country. The government continued its crackdown calling for curfews in Cairo, Alexandria, and Suez from 6 PM to 6 AM.

The curfews for the following days kept getting longer until the government called for a general curfew from 3 PM to 8 AM. But each time the people simply ignored it and increased their demands, calling for total regime change and the ouster of Mubarak.

An Uprising turns into a Revolution

By Thursday, the organizers called for "A Day of Rage" after Friday's congregational prayers. The next round of protests included participation by all opposition groups, the largest of which was the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). Immediately hundreds of their leaders were rounded up and detained. As millions of people across Egypt took to the street, all 350,000 security forces and police were mobilized, advancing on the protesters and turning Egyptian streets and neighborhoods into battlegrounds. By the end of the day dozens more were killed and thousands injured.

Afterwards, security forces evacuated from all the cities. Chaos and confusion ensued. Police stations and buildings belonging to the ruling party were torched. The secret police opened all police stations and prisons releasing all criminals in a scorched-earth attempt to spread fear and chaos.

The regime hoped to regain the upper hand by proving its worth to the people as their source of security.

After a four-day absence, at midnight on Friday, the 82-year old Egyptian president addressed his nation of 85 million by blaming his government, describing it as "inept," and promising to appoint a new cabinet. By the following day he appointed two generals, his chief of intelligence, Gen. Omar Suleiman as his first ever vice president and Gen. Ahmad Shafiq as prime minister.

People immediately dismissed the superficial gestures and demanded an end to Mubarak's 30-year rule. By Monday the new cabinet was sworn in, retaining 18 of the previous ministers, including those occupying the important posts of defense, foreign, communications, justice, and oil.

The only major change was the sacking of the interior minister, appointing another general in his place. Not a single opposition party was consulted, let alone appointed. The first order of business of the new government was to reconstitute the security forces and restore order.

Although by Friday the authorities had completely cut mobile phone and Internet services, the genie was already out of the bottle. When asked by the French news service AFP, Abd el-Fattah, who has been camping with her colleagues since Tuesday in Liberation Square, said, after the government disrupted the internet, "We've already announced the meeting places. So we've done it, we no longer need means of communication."

She continued, "We want the regime to go. We've been asking for reforms for 30 years and the regime has never answered or paid attention to our demands." She then added, "It won't just be tomorrow, but the day after and the day after that as well. We won't stop, we won't go home."

Amidst the chant "the People demand the fall of the regime," Abd el-Fattah talked to Al-Jazeera TV, which has been covering the unfolding events non-stop since it began four days earlier, and called for all opposition parties to form a transitional government. But by Saturday the regime interrupted all satellite channels including Al-Jazeera. Egyptians were now totally cut off from all means of information and communications.

By Sunday afternoon a provisional parliament, made up of the major opposition parties including the MB, the liberal Wafd, and the April 6 and Kefaya movements, met at Liberation Square and appointed a 10-member committee, headed by Dr. Elbaradei. Their mandate was to negotiate with the regime the departure of the embattled president. The April 6 youth was disappointed since they had hoped for a formation of a transitional government rather than a committee that would initiate negotiations with the despised regime.

Meanwhile, in the absence of the police and security forces, the president sent the army to restore order and intimidate the protesters. Tanks and armed vehicles were occupying major squares, thoroughfares, and public buildings. The following day F-16s and military helicopters were roaming the skies in a show of force. But the protesters immediately embraced the army, hugging them, chanting for them, and asking them to be on their side.

The head of the army declared that the military would not attack or intimidate the people but would only protect the country and maintain order. A few officers even joined the demonstrators in denouncing the regime. Overall, however, the army seems to have kept its loyalty to the regime despite the popular call to oust the president.

Meanwhile, people formed popular committees to protect their properties and neighborhoods. Hundreds of looters caught by the people were found to be either deserted police officers or common criminals released by the police. All were turned to the army for detention.

Despite the massive demonstrations, the total paralysis of the country, and the increasingly hardened will of the Egyptian people, President Mubarak remained arrogant, stubborn, and unmoved by his people's rage towards his regime. He also was emboldened as he received support from other authoritarians such as the King of Saudi Arabia, and the leaders of Libya and the Palestinian Authority.

Furthermore, a former Israeli defense minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, considered one of the closest Israeli politicians to Mubarak, told the Jerusalem Post after speaking to Mubarak, "I have no doubt that the situation in Egypt is under control." He then added, "Our relations with Egypt are strategic and intimate."

As the events unfolded the regime seemed confounded and shaken. Initially, the official news agencies in Egypt blamed some members of the ruling party and low-ranking officials. For instance the party demanded and received the resignation of Ahmad Ezz, the right-hand man of Jamal Mubarak, the president's son and undeclared heir apparent.

Ezz was a corrupt billionaire businessman who quickly rose through the party ranks and oversaw the latest fraudulent parliamentary elections where the party won 97 per cent of the seats. Just a few weeks ago, he was praised by ruling party officials for orchestrating the overwhelming victory despite more than 1500 judicial orders that overturned much of the election results, but were ignored by the government. Ezz and his family immediately left the country in his private jet. Likewise, both of Mubarak's sons and their families left to London in their private jets. The head of the Cairo International Airport also announced that 19 private jets owned by the richest families in the country left to Dubai on Saturday. One of these corrupt billionaires was Hussein Salem, a former intelligence officer and a close confidant of the president. Dubai airport officials declared that they seized over \$300 million in cash from him.

Salem was the head of a private energy company that teamed up with an Israeli conglomerate to secure a long-term contract to sell natural gas to Israel. In June 2008 Les Afriques reported that Egypt was subsidizing Israel with hundreds of millions of dollars every year in energy purchase. By January 2010, the Israeli newspaper Haaretz exposed the secret and reported that Israel was in fact receiving natural gas from Egypt at a 70 per cent discount. The scandal was swept aside by the former Egyptian prime minister who refused to divulge to the parliament the terms of the contract. Subsequently when the government was sued, a judge ruled against it and invalidated the contract, which the government totally ignored.

Looking the other way: Human Rights but not for all

The Mubarak regime had one of the worst human rights records in the world. In June 2010, Human Rights Watch reported that "the Egyptian Government continued to suppress political dissent ... dispersing demonstrations; harassing rights activists; and detaining journalists, bloggers, and Muslim Brotherhood members."

Even the U.S. State Department 2008 Human Rights Report to Congress stated that "The (Egyptian) government's respect for human rights remained poor, and serious abuses continued in many areas." It continued, "The government limited citizens' right to change their government and continued a state of emergency that has been in place almost continuously since 1967. Security forces used unwarranted lethal force and tortured and abused prisoners and detainees, in most cases with impunity."

It concluded, "Security forces arbitrarily arrested and detained individuals, in some cases for political purposes, and kept them in prolonged pretrial detention. The executive branch placed limits on and pressured the judiciary. The government's respect for freedoms of press, association, and

religion declined during the year, and the government continued to restrict other civil liberties, particularly freedom of speech, including Internet freedom, and freedom of assembly, including restrictions on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Government corruption and lack of transparency persisted.”

But despite this massive indictment of the Egyptian regime by the U.S. government, the U.S. continued to support the Mubarak regime, providing it with almost \$2 billion annually, the second largest foreign aid recipient after Israel. According to the Congressional Research Report submitted to Congress in September 2009, the U.S. had subsidized the Egyptian regime with over \$64 billion since it signed the peace treaty with Israel in 1979, including \$40 billion in military hardware and security gear.

It also rewarded the regime with \$7 billion debt relief in April 1991 for its support of the Gulf war earlier that year. Furthermore, it intervened with the Paris club to forgive half of Egypt’s \$20 billion debt to Western governments. In short, the U.S. and other Western governments favored establishing a strategic relationship with Mubarak, because of the peace treaty with Israel, overlooking the nature of the regime’s corruption and repression.

After 9/11, the Mubarak regime played a major role in aiding and abetting the U.S. counterterrorism policy on rendition and torture. In 2005, the BBC reported that both the United States and the United Kingdom sent terrorist suspects to Egypt for detention. In that report, Egypt’s prime minister acknowledged that since 2001, the U.S. had transferred some 60-70 detainees to Egypt as part of the “war on terror.” According to journalist Jane Mayer’s investigative book “The Dark Side,” the new Vice President, Suleiman, was the coordinator of the CIA’s extraordinary rendition program during the Bush era. [1]

Despite George Bush’s grandiose rhetoric on democracy and freedom, Bush welcomed Mubarak, calling him a “good friend” and explaining that he looked forward to “his wise counsel,” when the Egyptian president visited Bush in his Crawford ranch in April 2004. With Mubarak standing next to him Bush said, “Our nations have a relationship that is strong and warm. Egypt is a strategic partner of the United States.” He then thanked Mubarak’s efforts on rendition and torture when he said, “I’m grateful for President Mubarak’s support in the global war against terror.”

In fact, the Bush administration subsequently received Jamal Mubarak at the highest levels of government in an attempt to groom him to succeed his father. In May 2006, the Washington Post reported that, “It was unusual for a private foreign citizen with no official portfolio to receive so much high-level attention.” The younger Mubarak met with Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, during his “private visit” to the U.S. While he was at the White House the former President stopped by to “welcome him.”

The sacred equation: Egyptian Dictatorship equals Secure Israel

The strategic relationship between Egypt and the U.S. was bipartisan. When President Barak Obama was asked by the BBC during his celebrated visit to Egypt in June 2009, whether he regarded President Mubarak as an authoritarian ruler, Obama answered with an emphatic “No.” Then he spelled out the strategic value of Mubarak when he said, “He has been a stalwart ally in many respects to the United States. He has sustained peace with Israel which is a very difficult thing to do in that region.”

This perceived security for Israel was key in the West’s continued support of the Egyptian regime. When Vice President Joe Biden was asked to comment about the turmoil in Egypt by Jim Lehrer of

PBS, he shamelessly declared on January 27, that Mubarak was not a dictator. Presenting the Israeli viewpoint, Biden said, "Look, Mubarak has been an ally of ours in a number of things and he's been very responsible on— relative to geopolitical interests in the region: Middle East peace efforts, the actions Egypt has taken relative to normalizing the relationship with Israel. I would not refer to him as a dictator."

On the same day, while Egypt's security forces were killing, beating and gassing the Egyptian people by the thousands, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton offered this flimsy reaction: "Our assessment is that the Egyptian government is stable and is looking for ways to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people."

Likewise, when White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs was asked whether the White House believed the Egyptian government was stable, he replied without hesitation: "Yes." When he was next asked whether the U.S. still supports Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, he reiterated that Egypt remains "a strong ally."

Not a single U.S. government official or member of Congress condemned the Egyptian government for killing and attacking its own citizens. When Neda Agha-Sultan was killed in Tehran in June 2009, many Western governments immediately issued world-wide condemnations blaming the Iranian government. But not so for the hundreds of Egyptians gunned down by their own government in broad daylight. Regretting the loss of life without denouncing the culprits is a disguised attempt to cover for the crimes and protect the perpetrators.

As the Egyptian people showed determination and resilience while the embattled regime intensified its brutality, the administration tried to backtrack. President Obama offered a stark warning to Mubarak when he said on Friday evening, "Suppressing ideas never succeeds in making them go away." Without condemning the regime he then urged Egyptian authorities to refrain from violence against their citizens, "Obama stressed that governments must maintain power through consent, not coercion, and that ultimately the future of Egypt will be determined by the Egyptian people." Human rights advocates were encouraged and relieved by these statements.

Take a stand: Either with the people or with the regime

The following day the President convened his National Security Council and spoke to several world leaders. He gave a statement imploring Mubarak to open the political process and engage the opposition. Britain, France, Germany, and the European Union also called for political openness as well as restraint against the demonstrators.

In an interview with CNN on Sunday January 30, Secretary Clinton, sensing the weakness of the Egyptian regime, gave implicit support to the guarded approach in handling the popular revolution when she said "What we're trying to do is to help clear the air so that those who remain in power, starting with President Mubarak, with his new vice president, with the new prime minister, will begin a process of reaching out, of creating a dialogue that will bring in peaceful activists and representatives of civil society to, you know, plan a way forward that will meet the legitimate grievances of the Egyptian people."

Yet all these mixed statements were not lost on the millions of protesters. In denouncing these ambivalent stands they chanted "No to Mubarak, No to Suleiman... No to the agents of al-Amrikan (the Americans)." Dr. Elbaradei declared that the moment of truth has arrived, "The U.S. has to side either with the people or the regime. They could not be with both." But on Monday January 31, Press Secretary Gibbs said that the administration would not take sides in the confrontation between the

regime and the people.

This hypocritical stand was in a stark contrast to the position Obama took two days earlier, or that of successive U.S. administrations with regard to the color revolutions in the past 20 years as in the Ukraine and Georgia in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, or the demonstrations by the opposition groups in Iran in the aftermath of its elections in June 2009.

So what happened over the weekend for the administration's turnaround?

The answer to this double standard seems to be the influence of Israel and its supporters in Congress, where the new Republican Speaker John Boehner and other Republican leaders supported the administration's ambivalent policy of not abandoning the Egyptian dictator.

In Israel, a real hysteria has engulfed the political establishment. On January 31, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told a news conference in Jerusalem that he was concerned about the fate of Israel's peace treaty with Egypt should President Mubarak be forced out of power and replaced by someone more hostile toward Israel. He asked for support of the Egyptian regime lest an antagonistic regime emerges in its place.

The same day Haaretz reported that Israel called on the United States and a number of European countries over the weekend to curb their criticism of President Hosni Mubarak to preserve stability in the region.

It was reported on the Cairo streets that when a speech writer of President Mubarak rushed into his office and said "Mr. President; this is your farewell speech to the nation." Mubarak remarked, "Why? Are the people leaving the country?"

This Egyptian joke captures the essence of the stalemate in the streets. Mubarak insists on staying in power regardless of any consequence, counting on his security apparatus, the army, and the implicit backing of the West. Meanwhile, the popular committee headed by Dr. Elbaradaei is not recognized by the regime, let alone to engage with it in meaningful negotiations.

Meanwhile, the decisive moment seems to have arrived. The protesters called for a million-man march in Liberation Square in Cairo and for a similar one in Alexandria on Tuesday February 1. Upon hearing this move, the military sent an important signal to the people. Gen. Ismail Othman, the military spokesman declared on national TV that the army recognizes the legitimate demands of the people and would not shoot at them. With this declaration the army gave an unmistakable sign for the president to yield. The government immediately went overdrive blocking all entrances to Liberation Square and stopped all public transportations to Cairo and Alexandria including trains coming from the delta and upper Egypt.

Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of people have flocked to Liberation Square. Politicians and party leaders, Imams and priests, judges and lawyers, former military officers and veterans, labor and farmers, professionals and the unemployed, taxi drivers and garbage collectors, young and old, women and men, families with their children, as well as prominent actors, artists, poets, movie directors, journalists, and authors have declared their support and participation in this massive march. Egypt had never seen such unanimity in its modern history.

Trickery and treachery are the practices of fools

On Monday January 31, the new vice president Suleiman addressed the nation saying that he was asked by Mubarak to open a dialogue with all opposition groups and to ask the judiciary to overturn

the disputed elections results of last November. It was a tactical retreat by the regime in order to waste time and exhaust the protesters.

However, the protest leaders instantly rejected this disingenuous offer and insisted on their main demand of the total removal of Mubarak and for regime change.

It seems that the embattled president would have to make a choice soon. He will either submit to the demands of the popular revolution and leave power or employ his exhausted security forces to battle his people, transforming Liberation Square to Tiananmen Square.

On the other hand, the challenge to the Egyptian people is whether they will stop their impressive revolution when the West and its local hirelings give up Mubarak in order to save his regime. The leaders of this revolution and civil society groups that have joined have so far insisted on regime change, not change of characters.

A few weeks after 9/11, the neo-cons persuaded Bush that after Afghanistan, the U.S. should pursue regime change in Iraq, Iran, Libya, Syria and its allies in Lebanon, and to give Israel a green light to eliminate the Palestinian resistance in the Occupied territories.

After almost a decade, the U.S. is struggling in Afghanistan and has enormously enhanced Iran's strategic regional posture by handing Iraq to its allies. Moreover, its ally in Lebanon was toppled while Hezbollah's candidate is forming the new government. The Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and his negotiating team have completely lost their credibility in the eyes of the Palestinian people after the recent publications of the Palestine Papers. The West has lost its ally in Tunisia, and is about to lose another in Egypt. Meanwhile its allies in Algeria, Yemen and Jordan are hanging on by their fingernails.

What a reversal of fortunes!

For most of the past sixty years, the U.S. has perceived the Middle East, and the Muslim world at large, from the dual prisms of Israel and oil. It has provided Israel with massive military aid, economic assistance, political cover and diplomatic shelter that not only denied the Palestinians their legitimate rights, but also prolonged their suffering and misery.

Furthermore, in securing its short-term interests of oil and military bases, successive U.S. administrations have favored dictatorships and repressive regimes in the name of stability at the expense of the right of self-determination to the people of the area.

Thirty-two years ago the U.S. lost Iran and has ever since been in a contentious relationship with it for its refusal to admit its role in maintaining the regime of the Shah. It is doubtful whether the U.S. government has learned that lesson and whether it would be willing now to clearly and completely side with the people or respect their will to be free and independent.

In his farewell address of 1796, George Washington warned his countrymen and women against the "passionate attachment" to a foreign country and advised them that "against the insidious wiles of foreign influence . . . the jealousy of a free people ought to be constantly awake, since history and experience prove that foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of republican government."

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P.S.

* From Counterpunch:

<http://www.unionbook.org/profiles/blogs/counterpunch-esam-amin>

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Footnotes

[1] See Stephen Soldz's account of Suleiman's role on CounterPunch, January 31: [The Torture Career of Egypt's New Vice President](#).