

Scenes and Stories from the Egyptian Revolution

Author : **Mansoura EZ ELDIN**

Translator : **Nicole EL HAJJ**

Tuesday January 25th:

AM:

I checked my page on Facebook this morning, everything was calm. Nothing suggested what was about to unfold. A friend wrote on his wall that he was on his way to a demonstration in the League of Arab States' street. I commented joking: "are you sure you are going to *demonstrate*?!". He understood what I meant and replied: "I am going alone to take part in a collective harassment party!". That street had in fact witnessed in the past years and on some feasts disgraceful collective harassment cases. None of us expected what was going to happen. We thought it was going to be just another demonstration similar to the ones we've seen and joined in the past decade. We never thought that it was going to contract the revolution infection.

Just a second! We need to go back to the very beginning to the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia. The successful revolution that took down Zein El Abidine Ben Ali had quickly filled the Egyptian air with its fragrance. Calls for an Egyptian revolution on January 25th spread like wildfire on Facebook. Everybody mocked the youth calls for a revolution through Twitter and Facebook. Would a revolution start on a pre-set date? Is a revolution a romantic rendezvous? Such were the questions raised through the social networks and in private sessions. Nonetheless, we were all hopeful, even those who doubted the seriousness of those calls.

I remember that the initial demands circulated on Facebook several days prior to the 25th did not predict at all what had come to pass. Although the upcoming event was called "the revolution of January 25th", the written demands were simple compared to what was ultimately accomplished. One of the main requests at that time was to "increase the minimum wage" which prompted one of my friends to rewrite the statement on his wall preceded by the following comment: "Good people revolutions do not request the increase of minimum wages. They demand the power". But in reality, the discourse and demands matured in such a way that they took everyone by storm including the rebels themselves.

In the blink of an eye, the Facebook and Twitter generation had succeeded in mobilizing hundreds of thousands from all over the country. From the north to the south, scores of people poured into the streets in the first couple of days, most were non-politicized young men and women unaffiliated to any traditional opposition. The instigators and organizers of the uprising belonged to a new internet-generation filled with overwhelming rage over the police torture and human rights violations in Egypt; a youth dreaming of a democratic state that respects its citizens; a youth that succeeded in making its voice heard by all kinds of people and social classes that rushed to join their ranks and transform the revolution of the 25th of January into a full-fledged revolution.

From the first night, people started grasping the fact that what was unfolding was an unprecedented uprising due to the huge numbers of protesters that took to the street, the high level of demands requesting the fall of the corrupt regime and to the protesters valiant stand in the face of the Mubarak's violent police and security forces.

Wednesday January 26th:

In my office at the newspaper, I was racing with the clock to finish my work and join the demonstrators in Tahrir Square. Wednesday was printing day. My window was open as I sat in front of my computer for god knows how long. I was suddenly aware of a foul smell and a rising commotion outside. I felt the protests getting closer to the El-Sahafa Street and the nearby neighborhood of Bulak Abu Al-Ala which was confirmed by one of my colleagues. From his office in Al-Ahram newspaper, Youssef Rakha called to inform me that the central security was targeting the protesters in front of the newspaper with rubber bullets and tear gas. We agreed to join the demonstrations together once our work was done. The demonstrators' roars were getting higher and higher calling for the downfall of Mubarak and his regime. The bad smell was getting stronger in my office burning my skin and eyes. I knew then that the tear gas used against the demonstrators was so massive for it was invading my office through the window. I found out later that the gas used in Boulak Abu Al Ala' area had spread into the surrounding residents houses asphyxiating children and elderly. While I was walking in the streets with Youssef, a cautious calm had set in. The central security vehicles surrounded the area like a pincer. The tear gas still filled the air. The downtown area was still shaking, vigilantly anticipating what might be lurking ahead.

Friday January 28th (Anger Friday):

12:00

Hala Salah Eddine, Youssef Rakha, Nael Al Toukhy and I met in Al Duqqi. We were going to join the peaceful demonstration that was to start from Amr Ibn Al-As Mosque. Immediately after the Friday prayer we marched yelling "the people want to bring down the regime". With the first shout, we were hailed by the security forces with tear gas. We kept screaming "peaceful, peaceful" to convey the message that we are peaceful and that freedom is our only request. They replied with more violence. The situation worsened; protesters spread into the side streets; Hala and I did the same. We were greeted by residents who warned us against heading to the metro and showed us the exit to the closest safe street. Many of the residents had joined the protesters as did many others in different areas. The narrow alleys turned into a maze closing in on us. Wherever we went we ran into security officers with their tear gas and rubber bullets. Finally, one of the residents took us in his car out of the area. We wanted to reach the demonstrations at Tahrir square so we had to be very resourceful to get downtown where we were taken aback by the huge security presence. We joined another demonstration in the surrounding streets of Mohamed Farid square that was mostly comprised of young people. From afar, we could hear the resonating sounds of the gigantic demonstration in Tahrir square as well as the screams and shots fired. With every passing moment the demonstrators were gaining ground and growing in numbers. They were exchanging coca cola bottles to wash their faces in an attempt to avoid the tear gas effects, covering their noses with masks and soaking their keffiyehs in vinegar

for that same reason. Shop owners were handing protesters free mineral water bottles; citizens were providing them with food every once in a while. As I was trying as much as possible to avoid the tear gas and its ugly side effects, I saw in the crowd a young woman crying and screaming in pain as if she had just lost a loved one. This crying beauty represented millions of Egyptians; she could have lost a relative on a sinking ferry, on a burning train in Upper Egypt, on one of the death boats that sank on the way to Italy or by a disease linked to the carcinogenic pesticides or polluted drinking water; or maybe just like the rest of us she had closely witnessed how dreams are stolen, people's will despised and their votes forged. I will never forget that young woman or the aristocratic lady driving through side streets in her luxurious car telling everyone she meets about the perseverance and heroism of the freedom militants at Tahrir square joined by tens of thousands from different regions. Her role was vital as at that point we were cut off from the rest of the world. With the internet service blocked and mobile service restricted, we were unable to communicate with our friends at other demonstrations. Before that woman passed by we did not know much about the nearby demonstration at Tahrir square except what we could deduce from the sounds we perceived, or about the other demonstrations at Giza square, in Suez, Alexandria or any of the other cities.

PM:

Due to the curfew I could not head back home so I spent the night at Hala's place near the Parliament, the State Council and the Ministry of Interior, in other words, near one of the hottest spots of the revolution. Throughout the night, the police and central security forces continued firing live rounds at the protesters. We followed the events from our window; they would carelessly open fire at the demonstrators and the nearby gas station regardless of the disaster that could occur. We could hear explosions in our vicinity but we did not know where they came from. Luckily, in spite of it all and regardless of the curfew, the demonstrators' marches did not stop. Their calls for freedom and dignity were continuous amidst a growing anger of Mubarak's tardiness in addressing the people and with the feeble words he delivered after midnight that were way beneath the gravity of the situation.

With every passing hour of the night chaos was creeping in. Police stations and ruling party offices were set on fire. The city was all in blaze as a result of the madness of the pro-regime forces, a regime that was on the downfall although it still refused to admit it. The protesters maintained their peaceful ways, which taught us that they were far more civilized than their greedy rulers. I cried when I heard that three thousand persons formed a human shield around the Egyptian museum to safeguard it from looting as did thousands others for the Alexandria library. Such persons are without a doubt educated and civilized young people who should not be accused of vandalism by the same persons who have vandalized Egypt and oppressed its people for decades, the same persons who released criminals from prisons and armed militias to wreak vengeance on the rebellious people. It was an uncharted territory for me; I felt as if a real war was waged by a mad regime that has taken its people hostage, isolating them from the rest of the world by cutting off all means of modern communication. Thankfully, landlines were still working within Egypt, so I called my eight-year old daughter to reassure her. I felt guilty when I heard her worried voice as if she was the mother and I her daughter. I

briefly explained the situation and asked her not to watch the satellite channels covering the events in the country; she answered me in a somewhat strong tone that she had seen the army tanks in the streets of Cairo and that it made her happy. I was puzzled as how to reply for I myself felt uneasy when I saw the army tanks and armored vehicles enter the cities. I did not understand at first why people were welcoming them vociferating "The army and the people are one". I was afraid that the army might disappoint all those who rejoiced for its presence.

Saturday January 29th:

AM:

I was heading back home. Hussein Hijazi Street where Hala lived looked as if it had just witnessed fierce fighting. The smell of fire filled the air; broken glass was everywhere; the parked cars in the street were dented some in more than one place; and here and there some burnt tanks were flipped upside down. I told myself that I will head to Tahrir square to check on the remaining protesters and the Egyptian museum, at least from outside. The army forces deployed all over the place were tenacious in forbidding me and others from entering the square. Continuous firing was heard. I asked worryingly one of the passers-by if it was the army shooting, he answered: "of course not, the army never fired at any Egyptian and never will". I wished then I could share his confidence.

I took a turn towards one of the side streets, Garden City, on the way to the Corniche. There I ran into a woman crying. When I asked her what was the matter she told me that her son, a simple worker at Semiramis Hotel, had been shot in the throat by the police and was lying in the hospital unable to move; she was on the way to his work to get him a sick leave. I leaned closer and hugged her; she muttered in tears: "we should not remain silent in the light of what is happening. Silence is a crime. The blood of those who fell should not be in vain". I agreed in silence. On the way home, I noticed a little late the absence of traffic police. I inquired about the matter of a taxi driver who informed me that the police and security forces had suddenly withdrawn completely. "They want to punish us", he added with a disdain that could not embody his hatred towards them.

PM:

Chaos, intimidation, looting and sacking infested the land. We were all under the impression that the retreat of the security forces was part of a well-laid plan of revenge and intimidation for it coincided with the release of armed prisoners and criminals. A friend living nearby called to inform me that a group of armed men tried a short while ago to force their way into her building. She warned me against such incidents as these armed gangs were threatening every residential area and sparing none. She reassured me that the peoples' committees that were formed rapidly were standing up to these gangs and she gave me an emergency number put in place by the armed forces to relieve citizens. I told myself childishly that this could not possibly happen to our building as if I was saying that such events could only happen to others. I dismissed this naïve thought and embraced myself for any possibility. The events that followed on Anger Friday, the killing and violence gave me greater strength though I was fearful and concerned for my child.

Less than half an hour after my friend called, my building was attacked. Fortunately, the concierge had locked the entrance iron gate. The attackers started firing shots to instill

fear; there were growing noises and screams below. My child was shaking as I tried in vain to call the army relief hotline. There was a huge commotion and I thought that the armed men had succeeded in breaking through the gate. Happily, the peoples' committee made up of the neighborhood residents had succeeded in fending them off. My hardest task was then to explain to Nadine how the security forces would relinquish their role of protecting citizens and connive with those who committed such acts (rumors had it that some of the secret police officers were taking part in the robbing and terrorizing operations). The message we got that night was loud and clear; Mubarak and his regime were giving the people a choice: "either us or chaos and destruction". The quick answer they got was: "stability is just an illusion and a lie if provided at the expense of human dignity and freedom... now there were additional reasons for us to bring you down".

Wednesday February the 2nd: Bloody Wednesday

On that morning, I was in Tahrir square. There was nothing to suggest what was about to happen. Since the army took control in the wake of Anger Friday and the retreat of the security forces, the demonstrations were organized in relative calm given that the army had not participated in the aggressions against the citizens they were supposed to protect, contrary to the police and different security forces. I left the place to fax two articles I wrote about the revolution to Al-Mustaqbal and As-Safir, two Lebanese newspapers. When I got home I was surprised to see that the internet was restored. I checked my Facebook account and found hundreds of messages from friends from different countries who had read an article I wrote for the New York Times about the events of Anger Friday. They were showing their solidarity with the people of Egypt. Shortly after, we got news of a slaughter committed at Tahrir square; the desperate regime once exposed to the whole world hired thugs to attack the rebels with Molotov cocktails, bats and mounts. It was a very symbolic scene: thugs and mobs riding horses and camels savagely attacking the peaceful demonstrators of all classes. At that moment, the regime had uncovered its most savage and ugliest face ever. It was the "camel riding" mentality versus the "software" mentality as one writer summed up the situation. It was at that instance that most people realized that the battle against Mubarak's regime was also the battle of civilization versus barbarism.

Thursday February 10th:

AM:

I spent the whole day at Tahrir square. The writers and intellectuals' demonstration at the steps of the Higher Council for Education had ended up at Tahrir square which throughout the revolution had become a Freedom Square breathing optimism and enthusiasm and artful and witty cheers and mantras. We then moved to Parliament Street where we were joined by the rebels at what have come to be known as "the liberated zone".

PM:

At seven pm I left home in haste to join what I had thought was going to be a celebration of Mubarak stepping down. I had returned home at around five pm but with news of Mubarak's upcoming speech and speculations about him stepping down, I decided to

return to the square to celebrate with the joyful demonstrators for the place had become an icon and a symbol of the revolution that had swept Egypt. I felt that I was in a different Egypt, one that I was not acquainted with. The air seemed changed; I could not smell the usual exhaust gas; I did not sense in the streets the desperation and frustration that had prevailed for years. It was as if an old world was fading making way for a whole new one. Everyone was ecstatic and euphoric waiting in anticipation for the president's speech, expecting it to be the victory speech of the revolution. In the taxi, the old national anthem "Be safe O Egypt" was played on the radio reminding us of the liberal Egypt that predated the military rule. From a distance, I could hear the fiery cheers and songs at Tahrir square. The festive air was even more evident than during the day. There was an unmistakable sense of calm, a semblance of awareness that the efforts of the past two weeks will soon bear their fruits. At that moment, the revolution had transformed into a celebration: lights gave the place a special feel while celebration and enthusiastic songs filled the air and discussions tried to foresee the outcome. After about two hours, we became restless and couldn't but mock Mubarak - and his regime - notion of time.

We feared that we would not be able to hear his speech in all the commotion so we decided to head to the nearest coffee shop before returning to join the celebrations once the speech was done. We ended up gathering around a cab. The driver had opened all four doors so we could hear the disappointing words sarcastically described by one of the demonstrators as "the speech of memories" for the deposed president was reminiscing about his achievements since youth in the service of his country. Around twenty people, mostly strangers, had gathered around the cab that night waiting impatiently to hear one clear and comprehensible sentence as clear as their sentences and requests. Instead all they heard was vague words, a rambling that was far from any logic or fact.

Next to me stood a young man in his twenties, wearing a fashionable leather jacket and jeans accessorized with a Palestinian keffiyeh to acquire the revolutionary look, without necessarily belonging to the old revolutionary type. He was anxious, losing patience as he listened to Mubarak meaningless jabber. He kept muttering infuriated at times: "get to the point!" then he started analyzing every word uttered by Mubarak, putting it in its true context, as if translating a corrupt and conniving language into a clear, sure and unequivocal language, his and his generation language. Before the speech ended, he shouted loudly and forcefully with eyes fired with all the determination of the world: "we will die in the field rather we will now march to the presidential palace". He said those words as if he alone held the decision of taking the revolution forward or ending it. With his last words coinciding with the end of the speech, Tahrir square behind us started boiling with hysteric screams in a reaction to the deposed president's disdain at the rebels and their demands. What followed was a spontaneous and harmonized reaction from almost everyone there. People divided themselves into three groups: one group to stand ground, a second group to march to the presidential palace and a third to lay siege to the state radio and TV building. Something about that young man's determination, confidence and harmonized reaction with the rest of the protesters at the square made me realize, in some mysterious way, that the end of Mubarak and his regime was closer than we had imagined.

Friday February 11th:

I was standing over the Nile Palace bridge waiting for a friend to head together to Tahrir square. I was facing the burnt national party building. The city looked worn out and yet free and different. For the first time in years I stood contemplating its every detail, staring at the Nile below and the buildings and people around... as if I was getting reacquainted with the places and things after ten years of walking by like someone trapped in "groundhog day". I had left the square, past midnight, that was swirling with anger after Mubarak's speech. I feared seeing signs of frustration but was surprised to see people's moral higher than even. There was literally no room for more people at the square or surrounding streets. Exhilaration and the belief in victory reigned supreme. After two hours at the square, I head to Merit Publishing that had remained open throughout the revolution to support the rebels in any possible way. There I ran into many writers; we discussed the future possibilities for a while before returning to the square. All thoughts and hearts were with those who had marched to the presidential palace, Mubarak's stronghold. Fears of violent clashes with the Republican Guards and of a new massacre haunted our thoughts. But in reality, what happened was one of the most amazing sights of the revolution. The rebels had thrown roses they carried at the guards surrounding the palace; their gesture was met with a better one: the guards turned their guns that were first aimed at the rebels towards the palace. Shortly after, Omar Suleiman announced on TV in a brief statement that Mubarak has stepped down and that governing powers will be temporally entrusted to the Armed Forces Supreme Council. The celebrations began.

Friday February 25th:

Two weeks after Mubarak's downfall, Tahrir square seemed a bit different. The five million demonstrators have dissipated into hundreds of thousands on that day. I did not see the usual ID check of people entering the square. The street vendors had increased in numbers in a suffocating manner, shouting and selling their merchandise: Egyptian flags, martyrs' pictures, water bottles and juices. The demonstrators' demands focused on bringing down Shafiq's government for it was part of Mubarak's regime. They called for a civil state, the cleansing of the security forces and the prosecution of Mubarak and the top figures of his regime. Something was bothering me and I couldn't quite figure it out. At night, the demonstrators in the square and in the Parliament Street were violently attacked by an army unit. Confusion and doubts as to the role of the army spread; everybody questioned whether the army was colluding to avoid the prosecution of Mubarak and his key figures. The Armed Forces Supreme Council classified what happened as an unintentional mistake and apologized without really convincing the protesters to go home. The determination to bring down Shafiq's government grew stronger.

Friday March 4th:

Following an exhausting week that looked like a trial of strength and intentions between the rebels and the army, the latter finally responded to the rebels' demands and accepted Shafiq's resignation. Well-informed circles asserted that it was a lay-off rather than a resignation. Most importantly, the army chose Essam Sharaf, the former Minister of Transportation, as new Prime Minister. Sharaf was widely accepted as a person and

had taken part in the revolution demanding the fall of the regime. In a very significant move, Sharaf, upon his nomination as Prime Minister, head towards Tahrir square on Friday march 4th to start his mandate there and assured the rebels that it was from them that he draws his legitimacy. It was an important achievement indeed. We have now a civilian Prime Minister who was part of the revolution and who now faces an important challenge in this transitional phase. I followed Sharaf's address at Tahrir square. I watched him being spontaneously carried on shoulders and I couldn't help but thinking of History's paradoxes and tricks. Today is the 4th of March and I am loudly reminding myself and others that it was on this same day back in 1954 that the famous crisis that followed the July revolution had divided the army in two: one group requesting the army's return to the barracks thus laying the foundation for democracy and the other determined to impose a military rule that had alas won! On this same day, 75 years later, it seems that the tables have turned and the army will soon be heading back to the barracks clearing the way for a civilian and democratic state. This is at least what we hope for. This is what we have all paid a high price for.

Notes
