

All in One

The cultural background of the Egyptians' Revolution against dictatorship and corruption

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Friday 11 February will live on in the world's memory, especially the memory of Egyptians. Tahrir Square from early morning was standing room only. The spectacle of the unprecedented crowd was magnificent. It had a touch of the sacred in its similarity to a host of pilgrims to a holy place. But people had not come to perform religious rites, but for the sake of freedom, justice and a more human life, to oppose corruption and dictatorship.

From the start of the Revolution on 25 January, Tahrir Square was transformed from the merely geographic into the symbolic epicentre of the Revolution. Egyptians, not just the masses of young people, flocked there from every part of Egypt, from distant villages in the rural south, from cities on the edge of the desert, from Lower and Upper Egypt. They came not knowing whether they would see their families again. Some who came owned nothing, yet they still brought whatever food they could to share with strangers. Others headed to the Square with baskets of bread and, in the absence of a drop-off point, put the food down in the Square and turned around to find another spot to sit and protest. Then the scanty provisions were distributed among the revolutionaries. I saw two of them sharing an egg. There was no crush around anything except to find space to stand. I knew well off families who bought blankets to send to unknown revolutionaries to keep them warm in the open. With Egypt experiencing the coldest days of winter and heavy rain during the Revolution, the spirit and determination of the people that mobilized and rose up for freedom kept them warm.

We say the word 'people', but only understand its meaning when we see it embodied in a massive crowd coming from every direction. This was not just the young. The advanced in years came shuffling on their walking sticks. Fathers carrying their children on their shoulders and mothers nursing their babies must be unique in the annals of revolution. The symbolism of this scene and its reality on the ground shocked and affected me. I had read the details of Egypt's other revolutions through history, but none was like this. Whole families came to Tahrir. Fathers, mothers and their children came to sit-in. They spent days and nights there until that magnificent Friday.

The mainstay of the protests that I knew of firsthand, or from books, was young people or men. Egypt has also known women rise up. During the 1919 Revolution, women came out of the quarters and allies of Old Cairo and from the Saniya school for girls to protest against British occupation. They organized demonstrations where they removed their veils and courageously confronted the British occupation. This was repeated in Egypt's uprisings, the last occasion being the student protests of the 1970s directed against President Sadat and his policies. Then, too, the focus was Tahrir Square, considered the political heart of Cairo both because of the state institutions around it and its size. The

Square was built in the nineteenth century by Khedive Ismail on the pattern of the Place de l'Etoile (Charles de Gaulle) in Paris.

While Egypt, even in Mameluke times, has known women coming out to protest, whole families demonstrating, including babies, was something I had not witnessed before. Then I remembered how the spirit of the family is reflected in artefacts on display at the Egyptian Museum (which sadly suffered some damage). In Ancient Egyptian art, the artist's care to depict the family is noticeable. We see a father and mother with their son or daughter between them, the man or woman's hand lying lovingly on the shoulder of their spouse. Images from Tel el-Amarna of the ruler Akhenaton are imbued with the family. Family feeling is deeply rooted in the Egyptian people.

In Old Cairo I have often glimpsed something similar to the ancient murals and sculptures. A pedlar carrying his child while pushing his cart in front of him; a public-sector driver with a photo of his children on the dashboard. The sociologist Sayyid Oweis pointed out that among the signs written on trucks and taxis are many (and this is something intimately Egyptian) that express family ties and that offer prayers for children who, now, remember yesterday. This explains why the break-up of the traditional Egyptian family was so heartfelt. It resulted from the open-door economic policy that began under Sadat and became monstrous under Mubarak who turned the regime into something akin to the Mafia. Fathers and sons were forced to seek work in other Arab countries, and thousands of young men had to board crafts of death in an effort to cross the Mediterranean. I still remember going years ago to a village in the depths of the southern countryside to deliver aid for poor families from the newspaper where I worked. It was mid-afternoon and I was taken aback that most of the village comprised women and elderly men. Most of their husbands were abroad. Historically, Egypt had never known anything like it.

Egyptians are bound to their close and extended family and the wider family of nation and humanity. In the ancient state, the Pharaoh exiled one of his courtiers, Sinuhe, to an island in the Mediterranean (perhaps it was Crete). He spent hard years in exile, distressed most that he might die and be buried in a foreign land. He sent highly moving letters to the Pharaoh that express the anguish of exile and that are considered among the world's oldest literary texts.

Many thought that the harsh economic conditions and the corruption of the regime over recent decades had debased the Egyptians. But the Revolution has affirmed that their essence remains intact. They were only awaiting the spark. During their long silence I always drew attention to the private nature of Egyptians' activity and that nobody should be fooled by this silence in the face of corruption and injustice. As I watched time go by, I became concerned about this double life and feared that the situation would continue unchanged.

Many circumstances have ravaged my generation over the last sixty years during which things went from bad to worse, whether in the time of Gamal Abdel Nasser when freedoms were denied or of Sadat when the seeds of corruption were sown. But the situation in recent decades went beyond the imagination. This was assisted by how long he remained in power, by a brutish intelligence in dealing with the Egyptians and by extreme viciousness. The organs of the state, the police in particular, were placed at the disposal of this Mafia. Some police officers in special units wore civilian clothing and attacked demonstrators and protestors. There were obscure killings, the beating-up of

dissidents out of sight and kidnappings like that of Dr Abdel Wahab Elmessiri who was dumped in the desert despite his medical condition. The regime acted viciously and bloodily towards dissent, especially when it concerned the president's family circle. The Egyptians' long silence continued, but the deep and essential elements of their makeup were activated on 25 January. This reached its climax on that sacred Friday when the Egyptians became one. All in One. Just as the ancient Egyptian texts describe how the limited individual passes over into a limitless universe.

Friday 11 February and the Square is crammed. Every sort of Egyptian, men, women and children, have come from every direction. Women with head-scarves stand side by side with bare-headed women; Muslim alongside Christian. When Christians pray, Muslims stand guard and vice versa. Incidents of sectarian strife have been forgotten. (There is evidence of an incendiary role played here by the regime in its bid to stay in power.) Eighteen days of continuous protest without sexual harassment, without theft, without the smashing of a pane of glass. When some infiltrators called for violence, the people's cry of 'peaceful, peaceful' went up. The social tensions prevailing between Egyptians prior to the Revolution have vanished. Society was enduring an anti-human climate and mass depression. Fights would break out for the slightest reason. In Tahrir Square, after the Revolution, the Egyptian psyche has changed. Hundreds of doctors vied to be there. They set up field hospitals at the entrances to the Metro station and in the gaps between buildings. They organized themselves into groups and shifts. Some of them had nothing to do with politics before the Revolution but became totally involved, not just performing their professional and humanitarian duty, but demonstrating and repelling the thugs of the regime, the criminals, the prisoners deliberately released from prison by the former interior minister to terrorize Egyptian society in general and the revolutionaries of Tahrir Square in particular.

The sudden withdrawal of the police will remain a blot on Egypt's history. I will never forget that first night when the police disappeared, on purpose and following orders, leaving Egypt prey to criminals and released prisoners. Pleas for help came one after another on the radio and television. That night I took to the street with my neighbours, each of us carrying whatever was to hand, a stick or a kitchen knife. A few had light weapons. The criminals had improvised weapons and firearms. The Zahraa neighbourhood, close to my house, was widely looted. That night and the strange and frightening nights to follow will cast a shadow over the experience of peoples. The regime revealed its true nature openly, while before it had been more discreet. In Tahrir Square, Egyptians, including women, children and the elderly, embodied the longing for a better life, while on the fringes of the Square stood thugs, prisoners and criminals. Over the past few decades the regime has created a new clique to loot the country and its riches. The coffers of the banks were thrown open to certain businessmen who were given vast tracts of land. Some even had private airfields. These people funded organized attacks and set criminals free to attack the people. Hundreds of people fell victim as a result. Sadly, the regime and its figureheads remain standing till now. True, its head and some of his men have been toppled. Yet the regime still stands, and changing it requires a broader vision and more rapid action. The unity of the Egyptians and the revival of their spirit could be the starting point for a new era, for a new spirit in all fields, cultural, economic and political. This is just what happened after the 1919 Revolution. However, reaping the fruits of the Revolution requires a different regime and

new faces as a backdrop. This is still in its birth pangs.

On the morning of Friday 11 February the mobilization of the Egyptians reached its culmination. All of Egypt had become a space of liberation. This movement, the Revolution, had come true. Nobody expected a national revolution. Everyone thought there was insufficient will for a mass movement. Only those who grasp the particular culture of the Egyptians can understand this very Egyptian condition. This culture derives from the way their civilization forms them. Understanding this is crucial to understanding what happened. Some foreign intelligence agencies were criticized for not predicting what occurred. Without an understanding of the underlying culture of the Egyptians, which operates slowly and deliberately, it is impossible to predict where the situation is heading. The same applies without a close reading of the *Book of the Dead*, which accompanied those departing for eternity, or without an understanding of the Egyptian vision of the universe, as expressed in the ancient texts and in popular songs and proverbs. Consider this eloquent example:

Be patient with a bad neighbour. Disaster will befall him or death.

There will be no understanding without reading Egyptian historical sources (in particular, from the Mameluke period, al-Maqrizi, Ibn Iyyas and Ibn Taghribirdi and, from the Ottoman period and the French occupation, Ibn Jabarti) or *An Egyptian's Eloquent Complaints*, Tawfik Hakim's *The Return of the Spirit*, the works of Naguib Mahfouz and the leading modern Egyptian writers and genuine creative artists in all fields. Without grasping and absorbing the meaning of the ancient, and now rejuvenated, saying 'All in One', the last Egyptian Revolution cannot be understood and what is to come cannot be inferred.

The stance of the army gives pause for thought. The regime brought out the army in the belief that it was a force of repression. But if the leadership of the regime had considered the history of the Egyptian Army, it would not have decided to bring it onto the streets. Since its creation during the reign of Mohammed Ali Pasha, the founder of the modern state, the modern Egyptian Army has never acted to repress its people. The army has always come to the fore in times of crisis. The stance of the officer Ahmed Orabi in Abdeen Square when confronting the Khedive in 1881 has its counterpart in the stance of Field-Marshal Mohammed Hussein Tantawi and his comrades in confronting the head of the regime at the moment of crisis when it seemed as if the state might collapse. The president did not resign. He was pushed. If the president had read the history of the army, in whose ranks he fought and where he was a leading figure, he would have realized the outcome. When the army took to the streets, the masses welcomed it with flowers. Both the army and the people witnessed moving scenes that will live on in the national memory: Egyptians riding the tanks; soldiers sharing their food with protestors; armoured vehicles scrawled with 'Down with Mubarak'. This may be the first time in the world that the army of a state has come out to crush a revolution and had its machinery sport revolutionary slogans. Not a single member of the armed forces was heavy-handed with a member of the public. There was an atmosphere of mutual understanding and affection. The army became a part of the revolutionary people, so fulfilling the wise, ancient words, 'All in One'. What scared me most was that something would happen, even if by mistake. But this did not occur. The intervention of the army leadership was decisive, and they saved countless lives and averted rivers of blood.

Over the course of that Friday, All in One came true. Without grasping the meaning of this in its cultural context, we will not appreciate the profound aspects of what has happened. The Egyptians unified and began to move as one. On Friday morning I decided to join those heading for the presidential complex, specifically Oruba Palace the president's residence . This move had begun the night before following his final address which enflamed the Revolution to its highest degree. Starting from Tahrir Square, small groups, a few hundred strong, proceeded up Ramses Street, one of Cairo's main thoroughfares. The suburb of Heliopolis is about six kilometres from the Square and in normal circumstances it would take about two hours to cover on foot, though it would be unusual to walk. But due to the exceptional state of affairs that night, protestors left Tahrir Square and other parts of Cairo and set out for Oruba Palace. On the way no one confronted them because the police had vanished. The first day of the Revolution, 25 January, was the opposite. Then, people trying to reach Tahrir Square divided into small groups, each of which became caught up in fierce and precise manoeuvres with the police. On day two of the Revolution I saw groups of young people of various social classes, including experts in the topography of the Boulaq district's backstreets, going in one way and coming out another while the police, who were stationed on the main streets, did not penetrate that unfamiliar maze. The aim of these young people was to reach Tahrir Square, the centre of the city and the symbolic meeting point of the revolutionaries where all became one.

On Friday 11 February masses headed for the presidential palace. In the morning I went to my brothers' house in Nasr City and from there walked until I reached the Rabia al-Adawiya Mosque. Mosques and churches were assembly points, not just places of worship. In the surrounding streets thousands of people formed ranks to perform the Friday prayer followed by the Prayer of Need, a special prayer performed before people embark on an exceptional task and from which they might not return.

I walked with the people towards the Palace of the Republic about two kilometres away. I was cautious to begin with. Only two days before, I had passed close by and seen the forces of the Republican Guard who, with their advanced weaponry, take orders directly from the president. Their stance was a cause for concern, but we did not know that the armed forces had extended its authority the previous night. The decision to remove the president had been taken. Only the announcement remained.

Crowds surged from all sides. There were the poor from shanty towns where most people live below the poverty line in subhuman conditions. Intellectuals and observers were always afraid that these people would emerge at the foreseen time of revolution and wreak destruction. When the Revolution came, they came out en masse but caused no damage to the people or the Revolution. They participated and acted in the same fashion as the rich and comfortable. The Revolution imposed its lexicon on everybody and unified the people irrespective of their origins or social or religious affiliations.

When I reached the outskirts of Heliopolis, characterized by its wide elegant streets and well maintained buildings (thanks to the presence of the presidential palace), some poor residents from the slums seemed astonished. One of them said to me that he had never imagined that there were such clean and elegant streets in Egypt. When I asked him, he said he lived in the slums of Manshiet Nasser, a district no more than two kilometres from the presidential palace. Some of the poor people were seeing Heliopolis and the palace for the first time.

As the march progressed and the masses increased I started to feel that I was part of everything. My caution and fatigue began to disappear. My bad health took a backseat to my existence. My steps took on a meaning when they were heading to the seat of the dictator. I had attended parties at this palace: when Naguib Mahfouz and Magdi Yaqoub were awarded the highest Egyptian honour, the Nile Medal. Now my mindset was different, I was only a part of all. All had become me. We had become one.

As we moved forward, it became difficult to find space to stand. I noticed fashionable women, whose appearance reflected their high social class, standing side by side with poor women underdressed for the cold. The Republican Guard snipers were arrayed on the surrounding rooftops. Some of them waved at the demonstrators. The tanks bearing the insignia of the Guard did not move. Their crews exchanged greetings with the demonstrators. The area around the presidential palace gradually became an endless sea of people whose roar swelled like waves. People, when they unite, can be likened to a force of nature, moving en masse to proclaim their Revolution or achieve their aim. This is the rare, fertile moment when the essence of 'All in One' is realized. The moments of the announcement that the head of the regime had gone, and All's and One's reaction to it, may well be the moments I remember when I close my eyes at the beginning of my journey to eternity.

Notes
