Tahrir Square

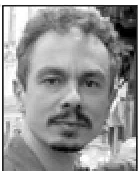
The Production of Insurgent Space and Eighteen Days of Utopia

By Nabil Kamel

On the morning of Tuesday, January 25, 2011, countless small groups of demonstrators converged towards Cairo's Tahrir (Liberation) Square—the focal point of the largest metropolis in Africa and the Middle East. Similar gatherings took place in several other cities in Egypt. These demonstrations were called by a coalition of opposition groups and were timed to protest police brutality on "Police Day," when the Egyptian government celebrates the "achievements" of its security forces. As more citizens joined in, the gathering in Tahrir Square reached over 20,000 people. By late afternoon, orders to evacuate the square were accompanied by the deployment of anti-riot troops and tear gas. This was still the "good and fresh tear gas, not the deadly one they used in later demonstrations," as one activist put it. By the dawn of Wednesday, the last few hundred protesters retreated—injured, cold, hungry and tired—and the square was cordoned off by massive numbers of security forces.

Later that day, thousands of demonstrators were prevented from entering Tahrir Square by security forces and mobile and internet communications were shut down. Criminals were released from prisons across the country and looted homes and businesses. These actions increased the indignation and anger of most Egyptians, who felt that the state had lost all legitimacy. Throughout Cairo, people took to the streets to seek and exchange news. Street by street, ordinary folks spontaneously organized themselves in "citizen committees" to protect their families and neighborhoods. As calls for a demonstration resonated with more people, opposition groups prepared to retake the square on the "Friday of Rage." They did, and despite heavy casualties, were able to hold on to the square. Police brutality, violence from armed pro-state militia, sniper killings, a passive-aggressive military and speeches with concessions, pleas and threats by an increasingly isolated President Hosni Mubarak failed to thwart the swelling movement and furthered the resolve of Egyptians from all regions of Egypt and from all walks of life. Eighteen days after their first gathering in Tahrir Square, Egyptian citizens ended Mubarak's 30-year rule—an extremely rare event in the over 5,000 years of Egypt as a unified nation.

The account of these eighteen days and of the events following them galvanized world attention and have been chronicled in all major media outlets, blogs and some academic publications. I will look instead at key aspects of the events in Tahrir Square since January 25, 2011 from the perspective of the social movements, anarchism and the actual production of insurgent space.



Nabil Kamel is an assistant professor in the School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning at Arizona State University. He is extremely grateful to everyone who joined the Egyptian revolution, and is especially grateful to his research assistants who helped organize and conduct interviews, collect data and document events from the first day. All opinions expressed here are his alone.

Root Causes and Grassroots Mobilization

> As the situation reached crisis proportions, with a million Egyptians gathered in Tahrir Square (calling for Mubarak's resignation), Obama calls Mubarak: "I think you should prepare a farewell speech to your people." Mubarak: "Why? Where are they going?"

This joke reflects the longstanding opinion among Egyptians about their former president, Hosni Mubarak, as dim-witted and disconnected from Egyptian sentiments. But this fails to answer the questions of how he could have ruled Egypt for thirty years, why his rule ended now and how it was possible to remove such an entrenched ruler.

There are three factors that allowed Mubarak to remain glued to the presidential seat for such a long time, but with time, each of these factors turned into a reason for his forced removal. First, Mubarak kept a relatively low profile compared to his predecessors. The main logic of his rule was to maintain the status quo and to distance himself from economic policy decisions. This left ample room for his family and friends in the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) to control the country's resources and use them to secure their grip on power through clientelism, legal maneuvers, intimidation and control of the media. Second, Mubarak adopted a relaxed attitude towards secular opposition groups and the media as long as his immediate family was spared from criticism. Having satisfied the modicum of tolerance needed to avoid embarrassing his Western partners in the "War on Terror," he was able to pursue a heavy-handed policing of Islamic movements, which he perceived as the main threat to his regime. The third factor that permitted such a long-lasting presidency was the failure of formal opposition political parties. Repressive practices by security forces, blatant electoral fraud, and thirty years of emergency law stunted public political life in Egypt. Without new cadres and a space for political action, opposition parties lacked an actionable agenda and ossified. This rendered them an ineffective political force and irrelevant to the Egyptian public.

With time, and the regime's self-indulgence and overconfidence, these three factors produced an explosive mixture with a life of its own and beyond state control. The impunity of the president's family and friends from prosecution, their insatiable greed and their reach into all economic spaces spurred anger across classes. Even upper middle-class residents and business elites outside the ruling clique saw their real disposable income shrink and their investments threatened by the manipulation of laws to favor the ambitions of the ruling class. Upper middle-class residents and business elites also, like the rest of Egypt, increasingly felt the threat of state violence from a police force immune from prosecution. Similarly, the deep disenchantment with the political scene, which in Egypt traditionally fed mainly the ranks of Islamic groups, produced a wide range of opposition groups led by professionals and intellectuals. Human rights groups as well as groups promoting a variety of rights—legal, health, and economic, as well as rights for prisoners—surfaced and gained traction. With Islamic movements receiving the brunt of state repression, secular and worker movements had relatively more leeway. Online bloggers, forums and social media were more difficult to control and were considered entirely harmless by the police. In a televised speech, referring to opposition groups, Mubarak literally said: "Let them entertain themselves." Just weeks before the onset of the revolution, Mubarak's son Gamal ridiculed a reporter who asked him what he thought of youth opposition groups on Facebook. However, a critical factor that shaped the outcome of the revolution was and continues to be the role of the Egyptian military.

Resistance Movements and the Production of Insurgent Space

A rich network of formal, rights-based civic organizations emerged alongside many less formal opposition groups that focused on specific issues or that were workplace-based. The early strikes of mining and textile workers of 1994 in the industrial cities of Egypt were limited in their demands and had weak unions backing them. However, as discontent grew over the last ten years, protests expanded beyond workplace issues and started to address root causes, including government inefficiency, widespread corruption and loss of political and economic rights. For example, in 2000, large demonstrations swept major Egyptian cities in support of the second Palestinian intifada. In 2003, Tahrir Square saw its first occupation by demonstrators condemning Mubarak for his support of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Solidarity committees emerged from these protests and, in 2004, the Egyptian Movement for Change, also known as Kefya! (Enough!), was formed from a grassroots coalition that included over 300 public figures and intellectuals with a wide range of political orientations.

The movement explicitly criticized Mubarak's regime and gained wide popular support for its open oppo-

sition to Mubarak's re-election in 2005. In order to draw more participants, the movement created several subgroups such as Mothers for Change, Women for Change, Youth for Change, Students for Change and Writers for Change, as well as local neighborhood-based committees. These groups sought opportunities for broad alliances and mobilization and supported strikes by judges, universities and workers throughout Egypt. In December 2006, more than 200,000 textile workers in the Egyptian delta organized strikes for six months, followed by strikes of truck drivers, poultry workers and workers in other sectors. These strikes benefited from the participation of grassroots organizations such as Kefaya!, Socialists for Workers Rights and the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as the participation of a number of journalists, artists, public figures, intellectuals, professionals, activists from civic organizations and university students and professors.

As protests became more frequent and larger in number they coalesced and stressed the demand for regime change at home. In doing so, they gained further credibility and drew more people. An activist in his thirties who was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood for twelve years until 2007, when he joined Kefaya!, explained the appeal of the movement: "It was the first time in my life I saw posters of Mubarak being ripped and calls for his resignation. It made more sense than the usual protests for burning the Qur'an here or there or complaining about the ban of the veil in France or bemoaning the loss of the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem. This went to the heart of the problem."

Within this rich and complex institutional web, formal civic organizations and their allied opposition groups played complementary roles. Civic organizations adopted an approach similar to Peter Marcuse's "expose, propose, and politicize" recipe. In doing so, they played a subversive role with professionals, relentlessly documenting and publicizing state violations, from police brutality to corrupt privatization deals. Opposition groups, on the other hand, capitalized on these opportunities to cultivate insurgency skills by documenting the response of security forces recruited, trained, and mobilized to respond to the protesters.

The efforts of this coalition culminated in the initial call for protesting police brutality on January 25 and shaped the insurgent space of Tahrir Square for eighteen days. Despite the wide range of political and class factions in the square and despite a number of protests that exceeded a million people on some days, this coalition was capable of sustaining a high degree of integrity. Tahrir Square was virtually a working city with hundreds of thousands of people eating, sleeping, playing, teaching, debating and, later on, working in the square as well as cleaning and defending it from thugs, security forces and the military. Layers of barricades prevented thugs and pro-state militias from entering the square and were staffed around-the-clock with rotating crews. Volunteer physicians ran field hospitals to treat the injured (ambulances transported the injured to central security headquarters rather than hospitals). Field pharmacies provided improvised remedies for tear gas and medication for people with chronic diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure. Stages were set and a microphone and loud speaker—a "radio station"—provided outlets for speeches, entertainment, news and debates by public figures, opposition politicians, journalists, artists and the general public during "open mic" hours. Sleeping quarters that started as mere blankets evolved into full-fledged campsites with tents, electricity rigged from street lights and supervised children's quarters. Memorials for fallen martyrs, artistic expressions, songs, dances, poetry and paintings were the spontaneous products of people from all classes and religious backgrounds. "We all danced, boys and girls, peasants and professors . . . we all sang together the good old resistance songs and lyrics of Ahmed Fouad Negm" recalled a Muslim Brotherhood leader.

As one activist that joined the square from the first to the last day told me: ". . . despite police violence, [and] the blood, not knowing what may happen next, these eighteen days were the best days of my life… young and old, poor and rich, the veiled woman and the young girl in tight jeans, Muslim and Christian, we were all equals, brothers and sisters, we ate, laughed, fought and cried together, we protected each other with our lives without having ever met before… I never felt so alive." "It was utopia," reminisced another activist with nostalgia. This euphoria was echoed by everyone I met that camped in Tahrir Square. The production and organization of a harmonious insurgent space the size of twenty football fields, filled with hundreds of

thousands of people with political demands, and resisting ruthless state violence was possible through an extremely high spirit of determination, volunteerism and cooperation with distinct anarchist overtones.

The success and perseverance of this anarchist moment for eighteen days was the product of several factors. The foremost was the simple and unanimous call: "The People Want to Topple the Regime" that resonated with almost all Egyptians, from ultra-orthodox Islamists to rabid soccer fans. This simple call was fundamentally different from other demands. Demands made in previous strikes and demonstrations usually satisfied both protesters and authorities, even if neither fully met their objectives. Protesters were satisfied for winning some gains, and the authorities for retaining their power and bolstering their legitimacy as grantor of rights. The call for overthrowing the regime was what Slavoj Žižek calls an "impossible demand." It is a strategically selected, precise and critical demand that the regime could not meet and leads to a confrontation that can end with only one party standing.

What furthered the resolve of protesters—aside from flagrant mistakes by authorities that are too many to recount in this short essay—was the flat organizational structure in Tahrir Square in which no single group or movement could claim that it represented the square. Without a hierarchical command structure and official representatives, Mubarak's authorities were unable to negotiate and secure a compromise. The absence of a hierarchical structure also encouraged individual initiatives, responsible participation, volunteerism and leading by example.

Another factor that shaped social dynamics in Tahrir Square has origins in an "insurgent citizenship." In order to navigate oppressive and often irrational state practices, Egyptians mastered adaptation and survival tactics based on contingencies, mutual aid, deceit and humor. This is especially true in the poor informal settlements where more than 12 million Egyptians live, most of them in and around Cairo. This way of navigating everyday life relies on the ability to seek and capitalize on opportunities, make do, redefine the use of the physical and built environment and opportunistically exploit events for local and international media and image-building.

Finally, a defining characteristic of the energy in Tahrir Square was the strong anti-patriarchal sentiment. This was especially prevalent among the youth who associated the ailments of Egypt with its aging rulers and mainstream political as well as religious leaders. This anti-patriarchal sentiment was immune to pro-state media pleas to treat Mubarak as a "father" and not to humiliate him in his last days. It motivated young members of the Muslim Brotherhood, men and women, to participate in the demonstrations even though the organization formally abstained from joining in. This sentiment also energized women who felt emancipated and empowered as they fought and camped in the square. This is why there was great consternation, especially among young women, when latecomer, ultra-orthodox Salafis, who advocate female circumcision and keeping women at home, won a large number of seats in the parliament. "Is that what I fought for? Didn't we start the revolution and fight alongside men? " asked a waitress who was referring to Asmaa Mahfouz, the young woman activist whose YouTube video called for the march to Tahrir Square on January 25 and mobilized youth from both genders.

Epilogue

It is not only women or the youth who are dissatisfied with the current state of affairs. Egypt's January 25 revolution has not run its full course. After more than a year, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces continues to rule the country. The constitutionality of parliamentary elections is now contested in court. Crime and violence are rampant. Strikes and sit-ins continue. Unexplained shortages of gasoline, domestic gas and foodstuffs add to the daily stress. Nevertheless, January 25 will remain a significant landmark in Egypt's history and the country will no longer be the same. A major political barrier has been breached and people realize that they hold the power to remove the most entrenched of rulers. P²