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## The Politics of Fearlessness: Egypt's Second January Uprising

LSE Ideas

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*New Crossings, New Heroes*

One image more than perhaps any other struck me as I watched transfixed the first days of the Egypt's Second January Uprising: the struggle of protesters to cross bridges into Tahrir Square. What is already being called the 'Battle of Kasr el-Nil' was an epic effort on January 28<sup>th</sup> by virtually unarmed protesters to drive back the feared Egyptian security forces in their riot gear and armed with clubs, sticks, tear gas and water cannons. The protesters took beating upon beating, but they just kept coming. The security forces kept being driven back, slowly but surely. By the end of the afternoon, they just broke and ran, as the protesters symbolically entered Tahrir Liberation) Square in triumph.

Even more symbolic was the first 'battles of the bridges' on January 25<sup>th</sup>, the first crossing of 6 October bridge. On October 6<sup>th</sup> 1973, Egypt launched a co-ordinated attack on occupying Israeli forces stationed along the eastern shore of the Suez Canal. Anwar Sadat, then Egyptian President and soon-to-be direct superior of Egypt's current president, Hosni Mubarak, had many reasons to do this: as a relatively marginal figure, he needed to gain political credibility with the Egyptian public, he needed to isolate his enemies within Gamal Abdel Nasser's Arab Socialist Union, and he wanted to bring the Israelis and the Americans to the negotiating table. The last thing on his mind was the Egyptian people's freedom. But the 'victory' of 1973 October War became the cornerstone of his self-image: he had a massive bridge named to commemorate it, 6 October Bridge, and liked to be referred to as *batl al-ubur*, the Hero of the Crossing.

Many have argued that this Uprising marks the moment at which Egyptians 'broke the fear barrier'. The crossing at 6 October Bridge captured that moment when Egyptians went from fear to that supreme courage to face down a tyrant. It was impossible to miss the symbolism of unarmed crowds struggling their way across the bridge. But this time it was the Egyptian people who made the *ubur*, crossing the 6 October bridge, on their way to Liberation Square. Like their fellow citizens on the Qasr al-Nil bridge, in making that six-hour, two hundred meter-long journey, they became heroes of a second and potentially much more important *ubur*: crossing the barrier of fear with which authoritarian regimes surround themselves.

Friday marked a turning point: organizers called for a 'million man march' after midday prayers. Even the notoriously cautious Muslim Brotherhood, who had as late as January 24<sup>th</sup> the refused to endorse the protests, officially declared its support. Friday prayers provided the ideal gathering places. The police surrounded mosques and attacked protesters as soon as they exited. Opposition leader Ayman Noor was hospitalised, and Muhammad El-Baradei detained. Both were prevented from moving towards Tahrir Square. But the police soon lost control, and demonstrators marched steadily towards the October 6 bridge. They would walk forward, the police would shower them with water cannons and tear gas. Demonstrators would come back, stand before the police, and standoffs would be broken by the crack of the state security's long sticks. Eventually they began defending themselves and throwing stones, but it was mostly by force of sheer, overwhelming numbers that the demonstrators eventually made it to the eastern bank of the Nile.

*Politics Beyond Fear*

At the time of writing, whether they will achieve this dream is still not clear. By day, ordinary Egyptians turn out in their hundreds of thousands, millions, and make the hopes for a non-violent democratic revolution soar. By night, the protesters endure waves upon waves of attacks both in Tahrir and outside it, aiming to break their will. Within the regime, matters remain murky. Mubarak's son Gamal may or may not have fled, but Mubarak himself is still President. It is likely that he will have had to make considerable concessions to Omar Suleiman, head of Egypt's intelligence and now Vice-President, and to Muhammad Hussein Tantawi, Commander in Chief and Defense Minister, as well as the new Deputy Prime Minister who were also Gamal's two main contenders for the presidential 'succession'.

But while these negotiations between various parts of the regime go on, protesters stayed on the streets. On Sunday, a new protest was called for Tuesday. A little-noticed fact was who called for that strike: the newly-formed Federation of Egyptian Trade Unions, an independent – and therefore illegal – organization into which several key protest organizers, from Kamal Abbas' Centre for Trade Union Workers' Services to Kamal Abu el-Eita's Tax Collectors' Union, converged. It is these groups that took the initiative to call for the January 25<sup>th</sup> protest, along with civil society organizations like the April Sixth Youth Movement and the activists congregating around the Facebook group 'We are all Khaled Saeed'. It was they who called for the March of Millions, and who remain at the forefront of organizing the demonstrators' resistance against the state's onslaught.

Media coverage has focused on undeniably important questions – violence, stability, security, negotiations between various elements of the Mubarak regime, opposition forces, etc. These are all important questions, but it is easy to be transfixed by punditry. Indeed, there are lessons to be learned from Egypt *regardless* of the outcome of the protests. The roots of these events and their significance are in the long run more important than palace machinations or even the success or failure of particular democratic uprising.

There are three lessons we can learn from the fact of these unprecedented demonstrations: the first is a reminder that autocracies can often be as fragile as they are violent; secondly, across the region the similarities between the causes of protesters' disaffection, rooted in neoliberal economic reforms, is striking; finally, that the remarkably non-partisan nature of protests suggests that there is a political space of personal freedom and social dignity which remains untapped.

### *Resistance Is Not Futile*

It can be easy to forget that even the fiercest authoritarianism can be fragile. We saw this in 1989 when the Soviet resolve to prop up its clients disappeared causing them to mostly just melt away. People took to the streets, and these regimes faced exactly the same choice as Mubarak's today: either shoot the protesters into leaving, or acknowledge their own political impotence. Faced with these options, only Ceaucescu seriously attempted repression – and paid the ultimate price. The rapid fall in quick succession of what appeared to be monolithic autocracies engendered considerable optimism that the 1990s would witness a world-wide 'Third Wave' of democratic transitions. The more sobering truth, however, was that often these new democracies slipped back into bad old authoritarian ways. With some of the 'color revolutions' of Eastern Europe losing ground, the hope – and historical memory – that non-violent revolution was possible seemed to fade quickly, and the Middle East in particular was often presented as 'Exhibit A' in the parade of contexts in which democracy appeared stubbornly not to want to emerge.

What was worse was that autocracies seemed to actually strengthen themselves by increasingly dressing democratic clothes and speaking the language of liberalism, while making only minor concessions to democratic substance. When this happened, scholars scrambled to understand the roots of this authoritarian resilience, reaching for reasons ranging from re-vamped Orientalist stereotypes about Islam as a religion or about Arab culture, to more sophisticated analyses of the tools of patronage and surveillance which keep regional autocrats in power.

But modern autocracies are rarely stable for long periods, and Egypt has been living under authoritarian rule for several decades. Nazih Ayubi (*Over-Stating the Arab State*, 1994, London: I.B. Tauris) made a famous distinction between strong states, which have the basic allegiance of their people, and fierce states, which do not, attempting to compensate by repressing any kind of dissent. Such ferocity might even be a proxy measure of its underlying fragility. Certainly, to underestimate sources of instability built into this form of governance was a mistake. The source of tension is that the regime has been backed into a corner by the contradiction between its elite-oriented reformism and the populism it needs to legitimize itself. The former is required by Egypt's 'oligarchs' and by the international community, but makes it impossible not to damage the weaker sectors of Egyptian society – and its increasingly pauperized middle classes – thus undermining its own legitimacy. As the Tunisian uprising, and recent events in Algeria, Jordan Yemen and Kuwait show, Egypt is not the only 'post-populist' Arab autocracy in which such tensions exist.

The sources of instability in Egypt's case have been brewing for several years. While macroeconomic indicators tell a story of strong growth over the past ten years or so, this growth has been highly uneven: 40% of the population live on or below the \$2 per day absolute poverty line, and labour unrest has become stronger in the last six years, spreading to newly pauperized sections of the middle classes. Along with last June's torture and assassination of Khaled Saeed, the events of Tunisia and Algeria simply provided an additional spark in a tinderbox which had already been smoking for years. In these conditions, 'people power' *can* work: the alienation of progressively wider sections of society plus spark issues such as Khaled Saeed's case and the Tunisian uprising lit a tinder-box which even the protest organizers underestimated.

### *Roots of Rage*

The dissatisfaction with the regime is nothing new. Within four years of the 'successful' October War, Sadat was seen not as the hero of his people's freedom, but as the agent of their oppression: his liberalizing economic reforms lowered subsidies on essential goods precisely during the recession induced by the war. To make things worse, to counterbalance his enemies on the Left Sadat had freed Islamist political prisoners, believing he could pitch one against the other and dividing, rule. By January 1977 things had reached crisis point, and his announcement of the cut in subsidies combined with a pay freeze lead to massive demonstrations on the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>, protests to which Sadat reacted brutally, with over 800 killed and wounded, but which ended once his government announced the cancellation of the measures.

Egypt has been pursuing precisely such policies increasingly aggressively in the past few years. Indeed, despite the worsening social impact, the International Monetary Fund had called for further reductions precisely in subsidies on basic foodstuffs the day before the January 25<sup>th</sup> protests. Increasing labour activism, the brutality of the police and government security forces, and the uprisings against a similar mix of impoverishment and authoritarianism in Tunisia, Algeria, Jordan and Yemen provided the spark Egyptians had been missing. To everyone's surprise – including the organizers, most of which were secular movements of young people or workers – the protests on Tuesday January 25<sup>th</sup> were unprecedented in size in Cairo and in every other major urban center. There were all the ingredients for a mix as explosive as that of 1977.

Nearly thirty-four years to the day, the slogans of that generation of protesters are not out of place in the streets of Cairo, Suez, Alexandria or Mahalla. In 1977, a deteriorating economic situation had already exasperated the population, that chanted *batl al-ubur, feyn al-futur?* 'Hero of the Crossing, where is our breakfast?', and 'Thieves of the Infitah, the people are famished'. For all his political grandstanding, Sadat did not deliver even the basic standards of living for the great majority of Egyptians, living standards made worse precisely by liberalization and rising corruption.

Today, after the acceleration of liberalization in the late 1990s, people chant key words like 'bread', 'work', 'social justice' and freedom. This 'liberalization' amounted to little more than the transfer of public resources into private hands and the removal of basic food subsidies. Coupled with massive increases in the cost of living eroded the middle classes, cuts hit the young particularly hard, leaving them without money, jobs, prospects of setting up families, or even the option of emigrating, because of increasingly stringent EU immigration laws. The fabulous wealth of the new oligarchs only increased the frustration of both the poor and the middle class.

It was this level of political and economic marginalization that provided one of the basic causes of the revolt, and which produced the 'leaderless opposition' of which many Egyptians spoke so proudly: given half a chance, ordinary Egyptians did not need parties, movements, or El-Baradei – much less the Muslim Brotherhood – to tell them how to protest, why or against whom. The political and economic inequalities which come with contemporary neoliberalism pose concrete limits to the speed and depth of any such neoliberal reforms. More importantly, these limits and their political implications ought to lead to a re-evaluation of the neoliberal policies themselves.

### *Islam Was Not the Solution*

The third element which ought perhaps to have struck more analysts is that throughout the early days especially, the Muslim Brotherhood was not only wrong-footed by events, but continued to make singularly bad political choices, as it had done during the recent electoral campaign. For a start, the Brotherhood initially called itself out of even supporting the January 25<sup>th</sup> strike. In a statement in response to the Interior Ministry's accusation that the Brotherhood was behind the protests, MB spokesman Essam El-Arian and leader of its more politicized wing said "the protest in Tahrir Square erupted spontaneously," and that the Brotherhood "did not send anyone." Indeed, on the streets, Brothers were notable for their absence. A small number of Islamists did take part, but despite the Ikhwan's lighting *volte-face* once the scale of protests became clear, there was no evidence of either the leadership or the numbers which the Brotherhood is credited with.

Even as late as the eve of protests planned for Friday 28<sup>th</sup>, the Ikhwan was playing catch-up with both the mass of demonstrators and with those liberal and left-wing youth movements – particularly *April 6*, and a range of workers' groups – who turned out to be much closer to the pulse of Egyptian frustration. Combined with the Brotherhood's failure to seriously protest the rigging of recent parliamentary elections and its inability to reject the NDP's economic program, this ambiguity in the face of the largest opposition demonstrations in Egyptian history may cost the Brotherhood dear (Teti and Gervasio, 'Egypt's Post-democratic Elections').

But the more general lesson of the (relative) absence of the Brotherhood during the first week of the uprising is that the possibilities for political change are not inevitably wedded to the Ikhwan. The Brotherhood may be the largest and best-organized opposition group in Egypt, but these demonstrations show that Egyptians are swayed by far more than just the vague promise of piety. Islam is not necessarily the solution. The absence of Islam from the slogans of the uprising and of the Brotherhood from its organization should explode once and for all any notion of 'Islamist dilemmas'.

### *Conclusion*

The uprising is the culmination of a long process of political oppression and economic impoverishment for vast swathes of the Egyptian population, and of an equally long process of mobilization. The massive demonstrations calling for an end to tyranny are the result of the combination of these economic and political structural weaknesses on the one hand, and contingent events such as the Khaled Saeed incident and the Tunisian uprising on the other. Taking their cue from Tunisia, the Egyptian people surprised everyone – themselves included – by rising up to pose an unprecedented challenge to the Egyptian regime, and in the process unexpectedly overturning the most entrenched stereotypes of local and regional politics, from the invulnerability of authoritarianism, to the inescapability of a trade-off between Islamism and democracy. We still wait to see what the outcome of the Uprising will be, but one thing we already know for sure: Middle Eastern politics will never quite be the same again.

Link to Andrea Teti's article published on the Opendemocracy website: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/andrea-teti/politics-of-fearlessness>

Link to Andrea Teti's interview for the AlJazeera 'Inside Story – Shaping Egypt's Future': <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOkaKSO-GZk>

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