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THE EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION

A participant's account from Tahrir Square, January and February 2011

Tahrir Square, a major traffic hub in the centre of downtown Cairo, was the physical and symbolic fulcrum of what is today widely referred to as the 2011 Egyptian revolution. Having defeated the brutal Central Security Police on the 'Friday of Rage', 28 January 2011, for 15 more days tens of thousands of protesters occupied the square, demanding the removal of President Hosni Mubarak's regime. The speed with which the square was transformed – really within a few days – into both a symbol of the Egyptian people's aspirations and a functioning social universe was remarkable. At the same time as the barricades put up at the edges of the square marked it off from the rest of Cairo, a psychological boundary also emerged, binding protesters together in a simplified yet unifying identity as people of the revolution. Within the square, the central section became a space of stability and functioning social life, while the 'Front', the main thoroughfare leading into the square where the barricades were placed against attack from regime supporters, became a space of uncertainty, violence and paranoia.

Here I present a participant account of the



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Fig. 1 (top). 28/1/11: The statue of Saad Zaghloul, leader of the 1919 revolution, confronting the Central Security (riot) Police, with hordes of protesters in front. Tear gas fills the air.

Fig. 2 (above). 28/1/11: Tahrir Square moments before the arrival of the army tanks.



Fig. 3 (top left). 30/1/11: Following the defeat of the Central Security Police, victory signs and determination.
Fig. 4 (bottom left). 4/2/11: Euphoria and anxiety in the square.

Fig. 5 (top right). 4/2/11: The signs read: 'Doctors' Revolutionary Headquarters 8 Medical Area'.

Fig. 6 (bottom right). 8/2/11: A wall poster displaying protesters' art work. Such endeavours, in addition to singing and chanting, helped to lighten the atmosphere of perpetual anxiety and expectation.

Egyptian revolution, written a couple of days before Mubarak's resignation. It concludes with some reflections on the situation that emerged in Tahrir Square, focusing in particular on social organization, identity, and the affinity between space and psyche.

12 days in Cairo

I land at Cairo airport on Sunday 30 January 2011 at 5.30am, keen to take part in what will be by far the most significant moment in my life so far. Over the previous four days I have been obsessively following developments from London and on the evening of 28 January I decided that I must return to Egypt. As I enter the arrivals lounge I notice that it is eerily empty; I step outside and find a lone taxi: 'How much for downtown?' '250 pounds', the driver says. Responding to my burst of protest at the price (the journey should cost around 50 pounds) he explains that he has braved the curfew and numerous civilian defence committee checkpoints to come to the airport. I go to departures; perhaps I can negotiate a cheaper deal there. Stepping out of the lift I see thousands of passengers, mostly foreigners, trying to leave the country. These are the first signs I see that revolution has come to Egypt.

The protests began on 25 January at the

prompting of several groups, most prominently the 6 April Youth Movement;¹ a Facebook-based coalition of young activists that formed in April 2008 in support of industrial workers demonstrating against low wages and which was further galvanized by the death in June 2010 of Khaled Said, a young man who was beaten to death in public by police.² Among the initial goals of the protests were an end to police brutality, the termination of Egypt's 30-year 'state of emergency' and the removal of dramatic social inequalities and the endemic poverty caused by systemic corruption and mismanagement. In a development that surprised demonstrators and riot police alike, tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Cairo and several other cities. The protesters were met with a violent police response; tear gas, water cannon and live ammunition were used to disperse the many groups intent on converging upon Tahrir Square.

The choice of this square as the point of convergence was natural. Tahrir, or Liberation, Square was thus named following the 1919 uprising against British rule. Strategically, it is a major transport hub surrounded by vital elements of the state apparatus: the parliament, several ministerial buildings, and the imposing Mogamma' El-Tahrir, an administrative complex known to Egyptians as a concrete maze of

bureaucratic inefficiency.

Faced with a brutal police response, protesters' chants quickly switched from specific economic and political demands to what would later become the refrain of large sections of the Egyptian population: 'The people demand the removal of the regime.' By the end of Tuesday 25, many protesters had been injured, several had died, and hundreds had been arrested.

Aware of the rallying power of communications technology, the regime cut all internet and mobile-phone connections early on 28 January. By then, however, the 'Friday of Rage' had already been organized. Hundreds of thousands of protesters fought running battles with riot police. By 5pm, the police had lost control of the streets; several police vehicles had been burned out and the headquarters of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) was on fire. In what would turn out to have been an order of the Ministry of the Interior, the police withdrew from the streets, leaving Cairo and many other towns without any police presence. A curfew was announced and the army was deployed to maintain a semblance of order and protect selected installations, notably the Egyptian Museum and state television.

That night and the following day, many prisoners were set free. Witness reports and



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Fig. 7 (top left). 30/1/11: Wrapped in the Egyptian flag.
 Fig. 8 (top right). 8/2/11: Aware of the camera, a young woman takes refuge behind her brother's photo. It reads: 'Mubarak's victim: My martyred brother'.
 Fig. 9 (centre left). 8/2/11: Protesters who had spent the night in the vicinity of an army tank positioned near the 'Front' in order to prevent it moving overnight and compromising the security of the square.
 Fig. 10 (centre right). 8/2/11: 'Nowhere to go: Mubarak is trapped here'.
 Fig. 11 (bottom left). 12/2/11: An Egyptian family celebrating. The man says: 'if I could carry all my children I would'.
 Fig. 12 (bottom right). 10/2/11: Protesters camping in Tahrir Square.

amateur videos posted on Facebook a few days later appeared to show prisoners being released by police officers, given weapons, and told to wreak havoc.³ The security vacuum prompted city residents to form local protection groups armed with improvised weapons. By the end of the Friday of Rage, Tahrir Square, which had hitherto been the site of daytime protests only, was successfully occupied by several thousand protesters.

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I arrive in the square early on 30 January. The atmosphere is overwhelming. As an Egyptian who grew up criticizing a hyper-corrupt regime I, like my contemporaries, have never had the opportunity to openly express my political views in my own country. To find myself in the middle of Cairo chanting for an end to an oppressive and brutal 30-year rule is exhilarating. At this point, the square has been occupied for two nights and one day; already the extent of social solidarity and organization is impressive. Amid continuous, often creative chanting, young men and women are going around collecting rubbish, one of them telling me 'this is our square, our home, we must keep it clean'. People are forming neat queues – something Egyptians never do – to buy tea at improvised stalls. Everywhere everyone is on their best behaviour; a few days later, women will tell me that sexual harassment, an endemic problem in Cairo, is absent from the square. A nearby hall has been transformed into an emergency clinic for those injured in battles with the police. Protesters of all ages, social classes, education levels and ideologies are talking politics and sharing their grievances, united by a simple goal: the status quo must end.

Late in the evening and in defiance of a largely ignored curfew, I set off home on foot. I am met en route by numerous local protection groups set up to fill the security void left by the police. At home my family, like many others, is sitting tight behind securely locked doors. They tell me that gun shots have been heard in the neighbourhood, that there have been rumours of homes being looted. They are scared. The disappearance of the police and the opening of some prisons were tactics intended to quell the revolution by forcing people to stay in their areas and protect their homes and streets. Though many Egyptians have embraced the revolutionary spirit, some are calling for an end to the protests, hoping to return to whatever order and security there was before all of this erupted.

Nevertheless, on Tuesday 1 February an estimated one million people gather in Tahrir, a daytime complement to the several thousand protesters who camped overnight and who have declared the square 'free' territory. By now the estimated figure for those killed by the police has risen to 300, and photographs of the revolution's 'martyrs' dominate the square's placards.⁴ In an emotional late-night appearance on state television, President Mubarak declares his resolve to remain in power until the end of his term in September: 'This dear nation ... is where I have lived, I fought for it and defended its soil, sovereignty and interests. On its soil I will die. History will judge me like it did others.'⁵

Next morning, while driving through the relatively affluent neighbourhood of Mohandesin, I see a small group of regime supporters chanting 'Yes Mubarak! Leader of our nation!' I head home for a wash and a meal and then return to the square. By midday a group of regime supporters has invaded the square; they attack protesters with rocks and metal rods. Later, men on horse- and camel-back armed with whips charge into the crowds, but are eventually brought down. Throughout the day regime supporters, many of whom are later found to be NDP thugs and plainclothes police officers, attack protesters with rocks and Molotov cocktails. As night falls, gun shots are heard and several people are instantly killed, apparently by snipers from nearby buildings.

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Throughout the previous days, state television and politicians in Mubarak's newly appointed government have been trying to undermine the revolution, repeatedly calling it a 'series of regrettable incidents'. They have attempted to exploit Egyptians' wariness of 'foreign interference' and predilection for conspiracy theories to portray the revolution as an attempt by outsiders to destroy Egypt. This could not be further from the truth: the protests were initiated by Egyptians, not by outside agencies. Nevertheless, the rumours take seed, especially among those who have not visited the square and whose only source of information is propagandist state television. On my way to Tahrir on Thursday 3 February I stop to buy cigarettes. On learning where I'm going the shopkeeper tells me I shouldn't participate, that the young people in the square are being used by 'foreign powers' to ruin Egypt. He asks rhetorically: 'who else but the Americans are distributing Kentucky Fried Chicken meals and dollar notes to encourage the people to remain in the square?' This is not the first time I hear this improbable rumour; it catches on rather quickly and, paradoxically, has the effect of bringing many people to the square to see for themselves. Later in the day, I overhear a young man on the phone: 'It's all lies, I am here in the middle of the events. This is real, our revolution!'

The violent events of the previous day have created a strong sense of 'us' (anti-regime protesters) and 'them' (this includes pro-regime groups, but also ordinary Egyptians who see the revolution as a threat to security and stability). As I enter the square on 3 February, I am struck by the brisk and efficient response to last night's battles. Large numbers of men and a few women have volunteered to carry out ID checks and searches – always respectfully performed – on those entering the square. The protesters are worried that NDP goons and undercover police will try to enter the square to provoke confusion and fear. If someone's ID indicates a police or NDP affiliation they are denied entry. A friend who is a journalist on a state-run newspaper is allowed in only after he swears that he too is outraged by state-media attempts to delegitimize the revolution.

Inside the square, several men have bandaged heads from the previous night's fighting. Many people have wrapped clothes around their heads for protection from projectiles thrown from

outside the square. There are now at least four emergency medical sites. The main entrance to the square is protected by several rows of makeshift barricades constructed from metal panels removed from abandoned police vehicles. Throughout Thursday there are sporadic attacks, and every now and then a loud banging can be heard – the drums of war calling for men to rush to the 'Front' and defend Liberation Square.

As night falls I go to the Front to participate in sentry duties. Standing with several men at the outermost barricade, I can see a group gathering on a nearby flyover; the source of bullets and other projectiles from the previous night. The mood is tense, almost paranoid. Someone asks: 'Who are they, are they with us or not?' I respond uncertainly, somewhat shocked by the sharpness of the divisions that seemed to have emerged so quickly. The situation feels bizarre: here I am, standing behind a barricade in the middle of Cairo, the street littered with rocks and bits of metal, with bandaged men all around me and women filling bags with small rocks in anticipation of further attacks, while others distribute water and food to those protecting the square, and we are all staring nervously at some fellow Egyptians on the other side of the barriers who might or might not be 'with us'. On several occasions on that day a man entering Tahrir would arouse suspicion for one reason or another, only to be immediately surrounded and often attacked by a mob of protesters, before eventually being pulled out and handed to the soldiers who were surrounding the square but remaining neutral.

After a few hours at the Front, I return to the centre. The mood here could not be more different: people are chanting, singing, sharing whatever food they have amid passionate but amicable political exchanges. It seems to me that the men at the Front are doing a good job; enabling the revolution to continue in the heart of the square, shielded from the dangers outside.

* * *

The 'Friday of Resilience' of 4 February is to be another 'million-person' protest, and when the day arrives, the square is packed. By now the division of labour is impressively thorough. Many of the men defending the square are wearing handwritten badges that read 'Public Protection Committee'. Some doctors have badges indicating their speciality, and some of those who have been cleaning up have badges marked 'Hygiene'. As my ID card shows I am a doctor, I am frequently summoned to one of the medical sites, only to be politely let go once they realize I am a psychiatrist. Throughout the day, there are loudspeaker calls requesting doctors to assist in the emergency clinics, and volunteers to conduct entry searches.

The mood today is jovial, even euphoric. Despite the attacks, more people are entering the square – it seems that more and more people are no longer heeding the regime's rumour-mongering. Friday prayers see thousands of people praying both within and outside the square, with Christian protesters in the square standing guard around us as we pray, a gesture that is repaid during a Christian service on Sunday. As the day draws to an end and the crowds disperse, leaving a core group of thou-



Fig. 13. 11/2/11: 'Egypt: 25 January': the date of the revolution rendered in the form of an Egyptian car's number plate, later converted to stickers and sold around Cairo.

Fig. 14. 18/2/11: Respect and remembrance for the revolution's 'martyrs'.

Fig. 15. 18/2/11: Previously only appearing at football events, the Egyptian flag became an expression of a real and palpable patriotism.

sands who stay overnight, I can feel a sense of ease in the air. The paranoia and fear that had dominated the previous two days has lessened. This is no doubt partly due to the decline in the frequency of attacks, but it is also because of a growing sense that, as a friend put it: 'we are not alone, more people are with us than before, the regime has tried everything with us: they beat us and killed us, they terrorized our families, they spread lies about us, and none of it worked'.

* * *

Over the days that follow, it seems that yet more Egyptians are shedding their anxieties about instability and foreign powers and embracing the revolutionary spirit. The boundary between 'us' and 'them' is softening, though it is not yet eradicated. As I write these words, the unrest is spreading far and wide, and now includes government employees, who are organizing sit-ins and calling for civil disobedience in the severest challenge yet to Mubarak's regime.

Cairo, 10 February 2011

Reflections

Perhaps what struck me most when I was in Tahrir Square was the simultaneous fragility and robustness of both the situation on the ground and people's emotional stability. At every stage there was a sense that it could all collapse, politically and psychologically; that we would be left with nothing but despair and anger. Yet at the same time we were filled with a contradictory, euphoric conviction that we had already won the political battle – that it was only a matter of time. Being in the square was exhausting, not primarily because of the physical challenges involved, but because of the mental burden of holding and containing these contradictory feelings over time.

Throughout, we were sustained by our unanimous agreement on a clear goal: the regime must be removed, a goal which later became simply 'Mubarak must go'. At times it seemed to me absurd that so many thousands of people could express their complex and diverse grievances in such simple, even reductive, terms. Then I realized that it could not be otherwise. Protesters came from all walks of life – rich and poor, devout and secular, old and young – and the only way their togetherness could be realized was through a simple yet powerful demand.

It was a situation in which Douglas' classic understanding of the relation between social control and the individual ego seemed almost superseded (Douglas 1970). In the impromptu temporary society formed in Tahrir Square, the power of the group emerged from the union of hundreds of thousands of egos in a collective cry against tyranny.

Yet at the same time we were placing our emotional stability and sometimes our lives on the line in anticipation of an event outside our control: the announcement that the president had stepped down. On 4 February, at around three in the afternoon, a group came running towards the square shouting 'He has resigned!' Immediately, a wild sense of joy took hold. A man crying uncontrollably ran towards me and hugged me. Cries of jubilation rang around the square. Then we learned it was only a rumour. The jubilation

vanished and we were left, again, having to contain the fragility of the situation.

What was particularly helpful in containing this fragility was the division of labour in the square. The spontaneous formation of leaderless committees of volunteers reflected the heterarchical nature and democratic aspirations of the society of protesters, and was a poignant erasure of the relations of political domination and subordination to which Egyptians have become so accustomed. In addition to being logistically useful, the formation of committees was reassuring, furnishing an embryonic community, one in which we all behaved in an idealized manner. It was both a message to the regime that we could manage ourselves without any imposed government or police presence, and a practical expression of the feeling that Tahrir Square was now liberated territory: it was truly empowering. Looking back, I can see that unifying in pursuit of a simple goal, creating organizational structures and engaging in idealized behaviour were all necessary to preserve a degree of emotional stability and social unity and therefore to ensure the survival of the occupation of Tahrir Square, the symbol of the revolution.

The mood in the square was made volatile by the sense of physical and ideological isolation from the rest of Egypt. The most critical point was Wednesday 2 February: physical attacks and the sowing of rumours against us meant that we had to protect ourselves, and the mood became one of tension and paranoia. The atmosphere of suspicion functioned to uphold the revolution, however, as individuals together embraced new, simplified 'anti-regime' identities, which became the only identities that mattered: no one cared about religion, regional affiliation, or even class. The negative aspect of this intensely felt solidarity was that it could prompt the mob responses I witnessed in the aftermath of 2 February. However, as the attacks diminished and anti-protest rumours were quashed, more and more Egyptians began to understand the

significance of the moment, and the square was visited by new first-time protesters. This radically altered the mood again and blurred the distinction between 'us' and 'them'.

As a self-contained social universe, the square replicated within itself the contrasting states of emotional stability and uncertainty experienced by its occupants. At the Front, the physical boundary between 'liberated' and non-liberated territory, the dominant mood was paranoid. The Front was a psychological as well as a physical border, marking the limits of the reality of revolution as it was experienced in the heart of the square. By contrast to the heart of the square, it was a place where uncertainty and a sense of unreality prevailed. One could say the Front represented the 'edge of experience' (Jenkins & Barrett 2004), while the centre of the square, where the revolution went on uninterrupted, represented the quotidian reality of the revolution's social universe. So acute was the difference that a walk from Front to centre was accompanied by a simultaneous shift from feelings of unease and suspicion to a sense of solidity, unity and safety.

Afterword: the 'Friday of Departure'

On the evening of 10 February, President Hosni Mubarak delivered his third speech to the nation. The convening of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces in his absence earlier in the day and the statements of some cabinet members had convinced most of us that this was the stepping-down speech. It wasn't. I had to return to London that evening, full of regret that I was not going to witness the no-doubt impending moment of celebration. On 11 February, the 'Friday of Departure', hundreds of thousands returned to the square. In an attempt to put further pressure on the president, large groups of protesters also went to the presidential palace and state-television headquarters. Around 5pm, the vice president appeared on television and announced in a 30-second speech that Mubarak had decided to 'waive' his powers and hand over authority to the army's Supreme Council.⁶

Celebrations erupted in Tahrir Square, carrying on well into the following day. Shortly afterwards, many of those who had been camping in the square left, and Tahrir Square was opened to traffic after 16 days of non-stop occupation. With the 'head' of the state body removed, many people began to agitate for wholesale political reform and, again, Tahrir Square was where they voiced their demands. On 18 February, the 'Friday of Remembrance', more than a million people returned to the square and, in what must have been the largest prayer assembly in the history of Egypt, prayed for the revolution's martyrs. ●

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1. See the movement's Facebook page at <http://www.facebook.com/#!/shabab6april?sk=info>.

2. A Facebook page was created by members of the movement following Said's death. Said became another rallying point for Egyptians demanding an end to police brutality and Egypt's 30-year 'emergency' law. This is an excerpt from the page's info section:

Khaled has become the symbol for many Egyptians who dream to see their country free of brutality, torture and ill treatment. Many young Egyptians are now fed up with the inhuman treatment they face on a daily basis in streets, police stations and everywhere ... Egyptians are aspiring to the day when Egypt has its freedom and dignity back, the day when the current 30-years-long emergency martial law ends and when Egyptians can freely elect their true representatives. ('We are all Khaled Said', <http://www.facebook.com/#!/elshahed.co.uk?v=info>).

3. A compilation of three videos posted on YouTube includes witness reports (in Arabic) from prisoners, and a scene of men apparently escaping in the presence of the police. Of course, there is no way of guaranteeing the videos' authenticity. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1QfAcz6mKdA&feature>.

4. According to Egyptian daily *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, the Ministry of Health estimated the death toll at 384, with 6,467 injured. AFP and *Al-Masry Al-Youm* 2011. Egypt's revolution death toll rises to 384. 22 February. <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/node/326562>. On 8 February, Human Rights Watch put deaths at 302 (232 in Cairo, 52 in Alexandria, 18 in Suez). See HRW 2011. Egypt: Documented death toll from protests tops 300. 8 February. <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/02/08/egypt-documented-death-toll-protests-tops-300>. However, some have suggested that around 300 is a conservative estimate, and that the real number could be two or three times this figure. See Allen Greene, R. & N. Elbagir, 2011. Egypt death toll may be underestimated, activists say. CNN, 10 February. <http://cnn.com.tr/2011/WORLD/africa/02/10/egypt.dead/index.html>.

5. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=sEmrMPnCMSw&feature=related. (The title of the video says 2 February, but it was 1 February). A full English-language transcript can be found on the CNN website: http://articles.cnn.com/2011-02-01/world/egypt.mubarak.text_1_egyptian-men-and-women-chaos-and-stability-young-people?_s=PM:WORLD.

6. See this Al-Jazeera English broadcast of the announcement posted on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ertDU2kGjkY&feature=related>.

Douglas, M. 1970. *Natural Symbols*. London: Barrie & Rockliff.

Jenkins, J. & R. Barrett (eds) 2004. *Schizophrenia, culture and subjectivity: The edge of experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



Fig. 16. 22/2/11: 'Expiry Date: 25 January'