

The Birth of the New Egyptians

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The victory of the Egyptian revolution has not only forced out a hated regime but has ushered in a new culture for the nation and the region. Whatever develops now politically in the transition to democratic rule, it is important to examine the subjective factors in the process, to try to go inside the mind of those who organized the demonstrations nationwide, and also penetrate the mindset of President Mubarak and his cohorts. In this way one can grasp the reason why there is no way of bridging the gap between the two, and can appreciate the profound revolution in thinking that has taken place.

The Beauty of the Revolution

The Arab revolution, ignited in Tunisia and now spreading through Egypt and beyond, is a world-historical event. The 18-day protest movement which led to the fall of Hosni Mubarak is the third greatest moment for Egypt in the last century, following the revolt against British rule which led to independence in the early 1920s, and the revolution under Gamal Abd al Nasser in 1952. As Rami Khouri noted in a moving article (<http://www.siasat.pk/forum/showthread.php?55640-The-Arab-Freedom-Epic-By-Rami-G-Khouri>), it was in the 1970-80s that many of the Arab states born in the aftermath of the First World War were transformed into police states, run by autocratic rulers who enriched themselves at the expense of the common good. Now, the Tunisian and Egyptian movements have overthrown two such rulers, and the Arabs as a people have asserted their humanity and regained their dignity.

The economic-social motivations for such dramatic upheaval have been identified widely in the major media: high unemployment, especially among youth who make up the majority of the population, a widening gap between the very rich – those who have benefited from the despotic regimes, pocketing funds through IMF-directed liberalization and privatization programs – and the very poor – those living on less than \$2 a day, or even less; dictatorial rule lasting decades, with emergency laws allowing for arbitrary arrests and lengthy detention without charges brought; torture of political prisoners, estimated to range in the tens of thousands; and so forth.(1)

This wretched state of affairs had prevailed for decades without serious opposition. Then suddenly — or so it seemed to observers, and foreign intelligence services who had not done their homework — people took to the streets. But it was not so sudden. True, the revolution that erupted in January was triggered by events in Tunisia, but the opposition had actually been organizing itself in Egypt since 2000. Prof. Ala Al-Hamarneh, a Jordanian at Mainz University in Germany, summarized the chronology of events in a presentation to students on February 10: the second Palestinian Intifada and the Iraq war provoked demonstrations at the Cairo University between 2000 and 2004; in the following year, when

parliamentary elections took place widespread fraud occurred. The Kifaya movement came into being, after former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed, on a visit to Cairo, told a press conference that he had resigned as Prime Minister because “22 years are enough.” “Enough” – Kifaya – became the name of a robust opposition movement.(2) In 2006-2007 strikes broke out against IMF-dictated privatization, in 2006 demonstrators expressed solidarity with Lebanon and, in 2008, with Gazans from the Israeli aggressions. In 2008, the April 6th youth movement came into being as a strike-support committee for workers opposing privatization programs. (3) Then, in 2010, when the issue of presidential elections appeared on the agenda, an “ElBaradei for President” movement emerged, along with the “We are all Khaled Said” movement, led by Wael Ghonim, – Khaled Said is the name of an Egyptian blogger who was brutally tortured and killed by Egyptian security services in June 2010. At the same time, so-called parliamentary elections took place, and were so thoroughly rigged that even the few token opposition MPs allowed to sit there found their ranks decimated.

Thus, the revolution that broke out in January may have *appeared* to be a sudden event, but it was actually the culmination of a long, slow, methodical process of organized opposition to the regime. To be sure, the timing of the revolt was catalyzed by the Tunisian revolution which succeeded in record time in ousting dictator Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, and ushering in a national interest government.

What triggered that event was highly symbolic. A Tunisian man, though fully equipped with a college diploma, had found no other means to support his seven siblings, than to sell vegetables on a cart. When the authorities halted Mohammad Bouazizi’s trade one day because he had no “license,” the man appealed to the governor’s office, but was rebuffed. He doused himself with gas and set himself on fire. What might be construed as the gesture of a desperate individual was in reality a tragic event that epitomized the plight of an entire population. It was the act of a man who decided to sacrifice himself to send a message to the powers that be, that, to preserve his dignity as a human being, he would rather die than submit to such arbitrary humiliation.

Bouazizi’s sacrifice will be remembered, just as the case of Jan Palach in the 1969 Prague spring is remembered. Or, to go back farther in time, to the American civil rights movement of the 1960s; there it was not suicides but principled stands by black Americans, even under death threats, that energized a movement. It was the decision of one Rosa Parks to defend her dignity as a human being rather than give up her seat on a bus to a white that catalyzed action.

Freedom or Death

What fuelled the Egyptian revolution was this moral/political issue raised by Bouazizi. Mohammad Seyyed Selim, an Egyptian professor friend and well-known intellectual, told me in the first days of the demonstrations that what mobilized Egyptian youth was not the economic misery per se that their generation has been suffered, but the social and psychological degradation that accompanied it. Egyptian youth, he told me, “can endure deprivation, but not humiliation.” He had forecast in an article in *Al Arabi* on January 23 that Egypt would follow the Tunisian course, because the two countries shared the same conditions. A similar phenomenon has been manifest in the various uprisings by Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, in the Intifadas: they were rejecting not only the Israeli occupation of their lands, but the theft of their dignity as human beings.

This is the decisive subjective factor in the revolution's success: young Egyptians who launched the demonstrations first showed the courage to defy the regime and its police state apparatus. After the Tunisian events, they overcame the fear that had held them and their compatriots in captive passivity over decades. When the regime responded with police attacks, and the first reports of casualties appeared, the movement maintained the moral high ground. It did not respond with violence, but continued to expand the mobilization. Anyone who followed the developments through satellite television stations over the days and weeks experienced something new on the Egyptian horizon. Young people were standing up for their rights and articulating their demands in unprecedented form. "Mubarak must go" was demand number one; then, the regime must go, the emergency laws must be repealed, a new constitution and new elections must follow.

These were the political demands. But the central factor in the statements made by the demonstrators was their willingness to put their lives on the line for the cause. What they told worldwide TV audiences via satellite stations, whether militantly or quite calmly, was: I will stay here in Tahrir Square until Mubarak leaves. I will stay here until I die if necessary. One young man looking straight into the camera said, "It's a question of freedom or death." He may never have heard of Patrick Henry's famous utterance, "give me liberty or give me death." But he transmitted the same message. He who is ready to die for a cause knows what it means to be human. As Martin Luther King put it, "If a man hasn't discovered something he will die for, he isn't fit to live."

This constitutes a fundamental revolution in thinking. I have had the opportunity to visit Cairo many times over the last decades and to present lectures to students at the University of Cairo, students who have now made history. In all my encounters there with undergraduates, I was impressed by their seriousness, their intellectual and political curiosity, and at the same time their respect for authority. When I was there in 2008, during the U.S. primary election campaigns, I talked to them about the perspectives inside the Democratic Party, outlining the different policy approaches of then-primary candidates Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. At the end of the lecture, the professor from the US Studies Department who hosted the event organized a mock election: he asked his students whom they would vote for. Out of about 150 students, 5 or so — mostly women — cast their votes for Hillary, whereas the rest were enthusiastically pro-Obama. After Obama was elected president, he travelled to Cairo in June 2009 and gave a speech which was supposed to redefine relations between the US and the Arab and Islamic world. Whatever one thinks of the US president, one has to acknowledge that at that time his words did fire up young Egyptians with enthusiasm. Although Egyptian and other Arab youth were rightly disappointed by the new US government's unwillingness to force the issue on Israeli settlements, still it should not be overlooked that among the slogans sported by demonstrators in Tahrir Square, were placards saying, YES WE CAN, and others saying, YES WE DO, i.e. we are moving beyond potential to action. This is *not* to suggest that Obama inspired the movement that brought Mubarak down. In fact, in TV coverage after Mubarak's resignation, students interviewed in Tahrir Square were adamant in stressing that they had *not* received impetus from the US for their revolution, and quite defiantly added that they did not need it in the future. "This is our revolution," said one young man, "and we can handle it." The reference to the echoes of Obama in their slogans is merely an indication of the gradual shift in thinking among student layers over the past years, from a state of passivity, if not outright demoralization, to one of active engagement.

History has shown in the American civil rights movement of the 1960s, or more recently in

the peaceful revolution of the East German population in 1989, that when a people declares that it is ready to die for its cause, there is no weapon capable of defeating it – short of mass murder. The massacres of demonstrators in Tienanmen Square in 1989 gave one example of total, brutal repression. And it should be noted that in that bloodbath, — although reliable figures are not available – it is estimated that somewhere between 400-800 people died; in Egypt, it was more than 300 – and yet they did not desist. As one young man put it, “They can’t kill us all.”

If “freedom or death” captured the political and moral stance of the revolutionaries, their practical, logistical organization of the demonstrations displayed an extraordinary ability to lead millions of Egyptian protestors peacefully day after day in their demands for fundamental social-economic reform. From the first demonstrations, when tens and then hundreds of thousands of Egyptians flooded the Tahrir Square, and similar locations in Alexandria and so on, there was no chaos, no anarchy. When vandals and thugs deployed against them, they set up neighborhood watch committees to protect persons and property. Student demonstrators showed they could mobilize masses and provide for their immediate needs – be it toilets, or water, or food, or medical assistance. A sense of social solidarity reigned which, as Mohammad Selim noted, recalled the climate back in the 1960s.

After Mubarak’s resignation, the organizers put out the word that, following well-deserved celebrations, demonstrators should return to Tahrir Square the next morning to clean up the premises. And they did. Why? Because for the first time in their lifetimes, these youth consider Tahrir Square, Cairo, indeed all of Egypt, as theirs, and they are taking responsibility to keep it clean and orderly. They are proud of their country, a country which has just become theirs. “Tomorrow morning,” said one youth quoted in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on February 13, “we’re going to go to Tahrir Square and clean up our city.” “We are also cleansing the square from the filth of the past,” said a bank employee cited by the *FAZ* on February 13, “we want a clean, modern Egypt. Yesterday,” he went on, “we were still demonstrating, from today on, we will build a new Egypt.”

This was not only a logistical question. Beyond the material solidarity was the unprecedented political and social solidarity: on Sunday Coptic Christians prayed together in Tahrir Square with Muslims, Muslim Brotherhood members joined hands with secularists in the demos. This was particularly significant, since the Coptic Christians had been brutally suppressed by the Mubarak regime. During the revolutionary process, it came out, in fact, that the former Interior Minister Habib el-Adly, had personally organized the deadly assault on a Coptic Church in Alexandria on New Year’s eve, which led to the death of 24 people.

The new Egyptians have been born in this historic process. They are people from all walks of life, all social strata, all religious faiths. What unites them is a revolutionary fervor to usher in a new system of government, based on democracy and the equal rights of all citizens before the law. The TV interviews with the youth document that they have assumed a new political, moral, and historical identity. They tell *CNN* and other satellite stations’ cameramen: “I want to have the same freedom that you have, and will fight for it to the death.” Others say: “I have lived for decades in fear and trepidation, now that is gone, and I finally know that I am a human being, with dignity and rights.” One of the loudest slogans to be heard on February 11, when Mubarak had left, was: “Irfa rasak, anta misri! – Hold your head high, you are an Egyptian!” Others shouted: “Freedom! Civilization!” Most striking is in fact their proud reflection on their civilization which stretches back thousands of years. I saw one young man on satellite TV extolling the glories of Egypt’s past, from Abraham (!) on down. And, after government-deployed thugs attempted during the demonstrations to

plunder the National Museum, it was demonstrators who set up cordons to keep the thugs out and protect the nation's immense archaeological heritage.

This is the real revolution that has occurred in Egypt. Not Mubarak's ouster per se – although that was the precondition—but the revolution in thinking on the part of a population, especially the youth, who were depressed and passive. Anyone who has visited Cairo over the past ten years as I have can recall the images of depression and despair. In front of every shop or public building in Cairo sat an old man in a battered kaftan, sipping tea and earning his couple of Egyptian pounds per day by guarding the building. Serving him tea was a young Egyptian boy who should have been in school, but instead was earning a pittance by working as a sidewalk waiter. In front of banks, hotels, and other large buildings were soldiers, police, and their official vehicles. Whether it was the national television building or the headquarters of the Arab League, or any ministry, everywhere the police and military maintained a very visible and at times intimidating presence. Hotel personnel were often obsequious, fawning over guests in hopes of a decent tip. Street vendors, like bazaaris, descended upon foreign visitors like buzzards, intent on extracting whatever bounty there might be, while scrawny cats fought over tidbits fallen from a tourist's table. All this has changed. Egyptian novelist Chalid al-Chamissi – one of the leading intellectuals who had foreseen the revolutionary ferment back in 2007 – provided a wonderful insight into the internal change that had occurred among many ordinary Egyptians. "I promise you," one fifty-year-old man (whom he did not know) told him on the street, "that from today on I will no longer pay any bribes to anyone." Another told him, "I swear to God, that from this moment on and for my whole life, I will never again offend a young girl or a woman."

On the Other Side of the Moon

From the onset of the upheaval, the big question was: what will Mubarak do? For days he and his government did nothing. Why? Here was a president of the most important Arab nation, backed over decades by the US among others, being challenged by demonstrators in a central city square, and he could not utter any word. In hindsight, it was perhaps that silence over days that depicted the regime's inability and unwillingness to deal with the reality that was unfolding in Tahrir Square and throughout the nation.

Mubarak's response – following four days' silence – must be clinically assessed. The man demonstrated his inability to face reality and a panicked attempt to escape. His thinking seems to have been: Well, if things are getting unruly in Cairo, then why not go somewhere else? Why not go to the seashore? This is precisely what the Egyptian president did. He departed for his Red Sea resort at Sharm al Sheikh, hunkered in, and hoped to wait it out.

In truth, Mubarak was living not in Sharm al Sheikh, but on another planet. He demonstrated no understanding whatsoever of what was unfolding in Cairo, Alexandria, and other cities, and could only issue orders to his interior ministry forces and their brutal police to attack the demonstrators. His successive televised statements showed a man tossing crumbs to the famished multitudes, a man who believed somehow that the mere fact that he, the great leader, was issuing statements and orders would suffice to stem the tide of protest. When the demonstrations expanded and gained wider popular support, he gave the order for forces, depicted in the German media as "apocalyptic riders" on camels and horses, to attack the protestors. And yet the ranks of the protesters swelled, reaching millions. Although confronted with an expanding protest wave, which crucial social and economic layers were beginning to support – like trade unions, lawyers, doctors, and so forth –

Mubarak still stubbornly insisted on maintaining his power, with the threat: if I step down now, then chaos will engulf Egypt. In short: *après moi, le deluge*.

An Egyptian journalist explained to me that Mubarak's psychological "peculiarities," so to speak, were well known and duly taken into account by the institutions and press. Journalists who understood the problem worked around it. Thus, if a certain political faction with its friends in the press wanted to promote a certain individual, then the journalists would launch vicious attacks against the man. Mubarak would then read the attacks as an indication that perhaps the man had something to offer, and would promote him. And vice versa: anyone praised in the press would be immediately held as suspect by Mubarak. Contrariness and stubbornness are his best known traits. His reasoning was: if they say he's good, he must be bad, because who are they? They do not know what they are talking about; I am the only one who can judge.

The Old Man in Politics Syndrome

Mubarak's behavior is not unique. The relevant psychological/psychoanalytical literature offers ample material on the syndrome that the Egyptian "pharaoh" manifests. The syndrome of the ageing political leader has been studied in depth. The work by renowned German psychoanalyst Fritz Riemann, *Die Grundformen der Angst* (4), lays bare both the symptoms and the sources of the malady.

Old men in political life have two alternatives: either they gracefully resign from office and allow others to assume responsibility through democratic processes, or they cling hysterically to power until nature takes its course. Malaysian Prime Minister Mohammad al Mahathir is a case in point. After 22 years in power, he decided to step down, and has enjoyed the position of respected senior statesman ever since. (And, in parenthesis, during the last 10 years of his reign, he transformed Malaysia from a developing country into a modern industrial nation.)

Mubarak was constitutionally incapable of grasping the fact not only that he was too old, but that he was no longer desired by his own people. In terms of Riemann's analysis, his behavior displayed characteristics of the hysterical personality.

This personality type has a deep fear of anything that is final, inevitable, necessary, anything that is perceived to limit one's freedom. Among those processes that are necessary in life is the ageing process; the hysterical personality yearns for eternal youth, and uses cosmetic means – be it plastic surgery or dyeing one's hair (as Mubarak has done) – to achieve the goal.

Hysterical personalities, when under attack, tend to try to turn the tables on their attackers. Thus, as demonstrators turned out en masse against Mubarak, he and state media put out the line that it was outside agitators, foreigners, terrorists, etc. who were sowing discord. As Riemann writes, when an individual realizes his shortcomings and guilt, then "the enemy image is especially appropriate and one gets the impression that enemy images have to be discovered in order to exonerate one's own sense of guilt"(p. 222). As a form of defense, the hysterical personality will seek to glorify himself or herself, coming across as the "first violin," and this tendency will increase as the insecurity and discrepancy between one's real identity and one's presumed identity becomes more evident (p. 196). Thus Mubarak's emphasis on his unique role as "father of the nation," as hero in the wars against Israel, etc. Riemann writes: "Position and rank are not seen so much as a duty ... but as an opportunity

to enhance the luster of one's personality, which is the reason why orders and titles seem so attractive" (p. 225).

The last inevitable realities of our lives, writes Riemann, are old age and death. Hysterical personalities tend to close their eyes as long as possible in front of these realities. "They attempt to keep the illusion of eternal youth alive and the image of a future full of possibilities for them" (p. 225). "They have perhaps the greatest difficulty in understanding growing old with dignity, but have the ability to elevate their past and to live in memories, which they have adapted according to their desires and in which they play the leading role." Think of Mubarak's last speech, glorifying his past as a military leader.

This personality type also characteristically dreams of being able to solve critical problems through some extraordinary means: the person hopes to find solutions for absolutely hopeless situations – like the daily demonstrations in Tahrir Square – by dreaming one might be able to mobilize some magic capabilities.

Riemann's study, which is a classic in psychological/psychoanalytical literature, provides precious insight by a professional, clinical analyst into the inner workings of a mind like that of Mubarak. But Mubarak is not alone. The syndrome can be observed in nearby Yemen, where President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who has been in power for 32 years, is fighting for his political life. Algeria is another case in point, not to mention some of the Arab Gulf states, like Saudi Arabia, where the rules of succession tend to perpetuate the rule of octogenarians. (5) Those few political figures who dared to come out openly in support of Mubarak, like the hapless Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi, should also be seen from a clinical standpoint, of persons who are projecting: the no-longer-so-young Italian premier is under massive political and public pressure to step down, but he presents the same psychological traits of Mubarak; he swears it is all a conspiracy against him, and that he will never step down.

It is not infrequent that when such ageing leaders struggle hysterically to maintain their positions, they sacrifice their own followers and students in the attempt to maintain total control and assert their own undying authority. Riemann notes that hysterical personalities will often end close relations with friends or associates, a manifestation of their inability to maintain durable personal relations (p. 191). The case of Dr. Hassan al-Turabi in Sudan is a good example. Here, what is interesting is the erratic decision of the part of the Islamist leader to openly move against the political leadership layer that he himself had educated over many years. After having successfully brought his movement to power in Sudan, in 1999 he launched a political challenge against President Omar al-Bashir, one of his students, and thus challenged his former associates to take sides, either with him or with Bashir. His students refused his demand and stayed with the president. Turabi later joined the Darfur Justice and Equality Movement and endorsed a march of that group on Khartoum.

Riemann's insight into the phenomenon of the hysterical personality provides a precious aid in understanding how and why Hosni Mubarak attempted, against all odds, to maintain his presidential authority even after millions of his citizens had defied police and other forms of state-organized violence, to demonstrate for their inalienable rights as human beings. Riemann's study is particularly valuable because it presents the characteristic behavior patterns of a Mubarak – and of his contemporaries among the ageing Arab leadership caste – in the form of clinical studies. And, by contrast, one can better appreciate – and celebrate – the healthy winds of change brought in by the revolutionary movement – the new Egyptians.

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Notes

1. The extent of poverty in Egypt is not generally known. Stories were circulating in Cairo about desperate Egyptian youth who sold body organs (kidneys) through a black market, to earn money to keep families alive. Other reports I received referred to impoverished Egyptian families who would sell a daughter to a rich Gulf sheikh who would "marry" her, keep her as a wife, and then, after she had become pregnant, leave her to her own devices.
2. I had the opportunity to attend public meetings by Dr. Mahathir in Cairo in March 2005, and to interview him. His impact on the then-developing revolutionary movement in Egypt cannot be underestimated.
3. April 6: <http://shabab6april.wordpress.com/shabab-6-april-youth-movement-about-us-in-english>
4. Fritz Riemann, Grundformen der Angst, Ernst Reinhardt, GmbH & Co KG, Verlag, Muenchen, 1961, 2006.
5. Much has been written about the domino effect of the Arab revolution, but one should keep in mind the profound demographic, economic, and social differences between the oil-rich Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait etc., on the one hand, and the countries of the Maghreb, Palestine, Lebanon, etc. The Gulf states have generally small populations, mainly linked to the ruling families, who enjoy a relatively high standard of living, plus foreign workers who have no rights whatsoever. So the social chemistry is not at all comparable to that in Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, Palestine and so forth.

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