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Egypt

An overview of the January 25th revolution

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Under these slogans the January 25th revolution erupted. The revolution, reflected both older grievances which had been growing particularly during the past 10 years and the rising protest movement against them. Amongst the major milestones of this movement which took on a social rather than a nationalist dimension was the famous workers' movement of Elmejala textile workers in 2006. However, this movement was preceded by the rise in the solidarity movement with the Palestinian people in their second intifada El Aqsa uprising as well as against the occupation of Iraq by the American troops in 2003.

However, one can trace certain events which could be seen as sparks of the movement. I would say there were probably four major events which played an important role. The first was the murder of a young man by the police on June 7, 2010, when a 28 year old man named Khalid Said was beaten to death by police in an internet café in Alexandria. His friends started a Facebook group named « We are all Khalid Said », which soon gathered more than 300,000 members. The murder of this young man was like throwing a match in an oil field. The majority of these young people had never been involved in politics of any kind before, but this time they had an issue they could all identify with: Khalid Said could have been any of them!

They formed discussion groups and moved from demanding justice for their friend to protesting emergency law, repression, corruption and unemployment. In short, they decided to take their destiny in their own hands and to go for real change.

The second event in my opinion was the return of Dr. Elbaradei a Noble prize winner who challenged Mubarak's leadership of the state and the constitutional articles which gave him the ability to monopolize it for thirty years. I think that this gave hope to many people, particularly many middle class youth who saw nobody but Mubarak since their birth, that a change in the system which has been growingly alienating them could take place. Again the Baradei movement inspired a nearly quarter of a million supporters on facebook.

The third event was the scandalous rigging of all the elected councils during the past year, particularly the rigging of the parliamentary elections which was done in the most blatant unsophisticated way reflecting the arrogance of the ruling clique and its contempt of the people.

However, the final push came from the Tunisian revolution, where the Dictator Ben Ali was overthrown on January 14. The youth said, it is doable if the Tunisians can do it, maybe we can.

Immediately in the aftermath of the removal of Ben Ali in Tunisia, some bloggers and facebook youth from the 6 of April movement for change, the Khalid Said group and the Baradei group called for demonstrations demanding "dignity, democracy and social justice". An inspiring speech was given by a young woman who called on all citizens and youth to join her and to leave fear behind for they are betraying their country as well as their brothers and sisters.

Its important to note the role that facebook and the bloggers played in organizing these youth through enabling them to contact each other and discuss issues and articulate their demands. This was particularly essential in the absence of strong political parties which could have connected people and played any leading role.

However, the deeper rooted causes can only be understood in the context of the changes that took place in the Egyptian society during the past thirty years and even before i.e. since the mid seventies.

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Under the rule of Sadat in the mid-seventies the economy of Egypt was suddenly transformed from a state provided and subsidised one to an open market economy where foreign and local capital ruthlessly seized control over all assets of the country.

A new ruling oligarchy was gradually formed under Sadat to flourish and take absolute control under Mubarak.

This new ruling oligarchy was born from the intermarriage of state power with business and in the absence of any type of transparency, corruption became a major intrinsic method for the accumulation of both wealth and state power.

Corruption ranged from selling state assets such as companies, or real estate for peanuts to business men who in turn sold them in days for huge fortunes. Billions of dollars could be made as a profit over night. This was in addition to money-laundering, commissions on all sorts of deals, including arms deals, as well as on foreign donations to the government of Egypt. Corruption and state power represented by internal security and the police produced the web which connected the top echelons of the oligarchy to its lowest ones working on the level of the local councils and local communities.

However, it is important to see the development of this Egyptian oligarchy within the broader global context. For it was the dominant neo-liberal policies guided and pushed by the USAID, the International Monetary Fund Bank and the World Bank and later joined by the European Union. The IMF called for the alleviation of state subsidies and state protection tariffs as part of its demand for "adjustment of the fiscal budgetary deficit" while the USAID and World Bank pushed for and guided the hegemony of a completely open market economy and the receding role of the state as a provider of goods and services.

The results of these policies adopted by the Egyptian ruling oligarchy and formed in its own fashion led to several catastrophic consequences for the Egyptian Economy as a whole, as well as for the majority of the the Egyptian people.

Egypt's economy increasingly changed from being a productive semi-independent economy to dependent one built mainly on the service sector. In the meantime, people's lives changed for the worse. Unemployment reached unprecedented level "some claim that its level can reach as much as 25%", most of those employed had no permanent contracts and hence no social protection, employment conditions also became worse in the lack of both state protection and or independent trade unions, nearly 60% of the Egyptian people lived in slums.

Meanwhile, oppression of the wider sector of the people by the police and internal security ranging from police brutality to torture became a daily routine to get fast confessions even if they were false to ensure control and even exercise sadism which became an inherent character and a part of the police training.

It is all these grievances that started to come to the surface particularly in the past five years where daily protests by different sectors of the population became the norm. These protests included a wide variety of the population that never before took part in any political or even economic movements. As people became more desperate, fear of the police decreased and protesting became infectious.

Hence, when the youth of "facebook" called for the demonstrations to change the ruling regime, to the surprise of the ruling clique and its security forces and even to the protestors themselves, not only a few thousands showed up but increasingly millions of Egyptian from nearly every part of the country came to the fore.

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As everyone now knows, as the movement gained momentum and regimes concessions pace was slow to follow, the demands of the protestors heightened from political reforms to the overthrow of Mubarak to more radical political change as well as social ones. With the death of demonstrators in the city of Suez the demonstrations took a new leap to reach million over all Egypt. Police brutality and sniper shots leaving some 400s death behind and organized terror of the population did not deter the people but made them more determined.

At the final days that preceded Mubarak's final declaration of his resignation, the workers of nearly all sectors joined the movement with strikes in their workplaces and a state of what can be called civil disobedience became a reality. The army would not or could not interfere without a blood bath whose consequences on the army itself could not be calculated. The regime had to concede and Mubarak had to go.

To date many success have been achieved. An unprecedented space for democratic practices has been won by the people. The ruling oligarchy's party, its internal security and police have been dealt strong blows, some articles of the constitution opened more space to break the monopoly over the presidency. However, probably the most important gain in this revolution is the change that took place in many of the Egyptian people themselves. The demonstrations and sit-ins, particularly the Tahrir square (now called by some Liberty square and by other Martyrs square) represented one of the most fascinating historical dramas in Egypt's modern history. Aside from the high degree of politicization that took place in the square, the stories of heroism, solidarity and sense of community that was built up will always stay in the minds and souls of the people.

For the first time and after a long history of increasing sectarianism, Muslims and Christians struggled together under the slogans "Muslims and Christians we are all Egyptian" we are all one hand" many held each other and raised the victory sign with their hands to the media and onlookers. Men and women, veiled and nor veiled stood side by side to protect each other and struggle on equal grounds without friction or harassment. "Together we struggle together we are willing to die", the crowds shouted. To Mubarak they said, "we will not go but you will go."

Yet real institutionalized democratic reform had not yet taken place. The old power still continues to rule and the same socio-economic policies continue to dominate.

Accordingly, this phase is an extremely delicate one and the strategies that will be adopted by the genuine democratic and progressive forces can mean success or failure of the revolution.

Although the street demonstrations have and continue to play an important role, they cannot and will not continue forever. Other strategies and tactics have to be adopted to consolidate the gains of the revolution and widen them.

In my opinion organisation and coalition building and prioritizing the demands come to the fore at this stage.

In this respect much has been achieved but much more has to be achieved if a critical mass of the forces for genuine change is to be successful.

A new trade union of the workers has been established. The youth movements have been able to form a coalition and a new party for the left has been established. Many different types of attempts at coalitions are in the formation and the critical demands of the movement are becoming clearer.

The process of organization should continue with the establishment of other independent workers unions in all the different workplaces while other community level popular committees which have been established and are being established should be strengthened. They should take a wider role in developing true mass participation in political

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decisions, in their representation in local and national elections as well as in their supervision of local institutions starting from local councils to police stations as well as service providers.

However, the most vital step required is the calling of a national conference which should involve all the sectors which joined and genuinely supported the 25th January revolution. A delegation representing these demands should be established to dialogue with the Army representing these demands. The conference should be supported by a critical mass which can then dialogue from a power base which is accountable to the people who made this revolution and are willing to continue to protect it to the end.

Finally, it may be good to end this article by a song made by the youth in Tahrir square which says:

"our voices will build not destroy....our voices will lead to change

never say there is no hope.... for your voice will bring on change

take the sleep off your eyes... get up and shout with the loudest voice

defeat your fear, for between us.... that who shouts will not die".