



The Egyptian Revolution: First Impressions from the Field

Mohammed A. Bamyeh

Al-Qahira, The City Victorious, February 11, 2011

Never has a revolution that seemed so lacking in prospects gathered momentum so quickly and so unexpectedly. The Egyptian Revolution, starting on January 25, lacked leadership and possessed little organization; its defining events, on Friday, January 28, occurred on a day when all communication technologies, including all internet and phones, were barred; it took place in a large country known for sedate political life, a very long legacy of authoritarian continuity, and an enviable repressive apparatus consisting of more than 2 million members. But on that day, the regime of Hosni Mubarak, entrenched for 30 years and seemingly eternal, the only regime that the vast majority of the protesters had ever known, evaporated in one day.

Though the regime struggled for two more weeks, practically little government existed during that period. All ministries and government offices have been closed, and almost all police headquarters were burned down on January 28. Except for the army, all security personnel disappeared, and a week after the uprising, only a few police officers ventured out again. Popular committees have since taken over security in the neighborhoods. I saw patriotism expressed everywhere as collective pride in the realization that people who did not know each other could act together, intentionally and with a purpose. During the ensuing week and a half, millions converged on the streets almost everywhere in Egypt, and one could empirically see how noble ethics—community and solidarity, care for others, respect for the dignity of all, feeling of personal responsibility for everyone—emerge precisely out of the disappearance of government.

Undoubtedly this revolution, which is continuing to unfold, will be the formative event in the lives of the millions of youth who spearheaded it in Egypt, and perhaps also the many more millions of youth who followed it throughout the Arab world. It is clear that it is providing a new generation with a grand spectacle of the type that had shaped the political consciousness of every generation before them in modern Arab history. All those common formative experiences of past generations were also grand national moments: whether catastrophic defeats or triumphs against colonial powers or allies.

This revolution, too, will leave traces deep in the social fabric and psyche for a long time, but in ways that go beyond the youth. While the youth were the driving force in the earlier days, the revolution quickly became national in every sense; over the days I saw an increasing demographic mix in demonstrations, where people from all age groups, social classes, men and women, Muslims and Christians, urban people and peasants—virtually all sectors of society, acting in large numbers and with a determination rarely seen before.

Everyone I talked to echoed similar transformative themes: they highlighted a sense of wonder at how they discovered their neighbor again, how they never knew that they lived in “society” or even the meaning of the word, until this event, and how everyone who yesterday had appeared so distant is now so close. I saw peasant women giving protestors onions to help them recover from teargas attacks; young men dissuading others from acts of vandalism; the National Museum being protected by protestors’ human shield from looting and fire; protestors protecting captured *baltagiyya* (mercenaries) who had been attacking them from being harmed by other protestors; and countless other incidents of generous civility amidst the prevailing destruction and chaos.

I also saw how demonstrations alternated between battle scenes and debating circles, and how they provided a renewable spectacle in which everyone could see the diverse segments in social life converging on the common idea of bringing down the regime. While world media highlighted uncontrolled chaos, regional implications, and the specter of Islamism in power, the ant’s perspective revealed the relative irrelevance of all of the above considerations. As the Revolution took longer and longer to accomplish the mission of bringing down the regime, protestors themselves began to spend more time highlighting other accomplishments, such as how new ethics were emerging precisely amidst chaos. Those evidenced themselves in a broadly shared sense of personal responsibility for civilization—voluntary street cleaning, standing in line, the complete disappearance of harassment of women in public, returning stolen and found objects, and countless other ethical decisions that had usually been ignored or left for others to worry about.

There are a number of basic features that are associated with this magnificent event that are key, I think, to understanding not just the Egyptian Revolution but also the emerging Arab uprisings of 2011. Those features include the power of marginal forces; spontaneity as an art of moving; civic character as a conscious ethical contrast to the state’s barbarism; the priority assigned to political over all other kinds of demands, including economics; and lastly autocratic deafness, meaning the ill-preparedness of ruling elites to hear the early reverberations as anything but undifferentiated public noise that could be easily made inaudible again with the usual means.



First, marginality means that the revolution began at the margins. In Tunisia it started that way, in marginal areas, from where it migrated to the capital. And from Tunisia, itself relatively marginal in the larger context of the Arab World, it travelled to Egypt. Obviously the situation in each Arab country is different in so far as economic indicators and degree of liberalization are concerned, but I was struck by how conscious the Egyptian youth were of the Tunisian example preceding them by just two weeks. Several mentioned to me their pride in seeming to accomplish in just a few days what Tunisians needed a month to accomplish.

Marginality appears to have been an important factor within Egypt as well. While much of the media focus was on Tahrir Square in central Cairo, to which I went every day, the large presence there was itself a manifestation of a possibility that suddenly became evident on January 25, when large demonstrations broke out in 12 of Egypt’s provinces. The revolution would never have been perceived as possible had it been confined to Cairo, and in fact its most intense moment in its earlier days, when it really began to look as if a revolution was happening, were in more marginal sites like Suez. The collective perception that a revolution was happening at the margins, where it was least expected, gave everyone the confidence necessary to realize that it could happen everywhere.

Second, in every sense the revolution maintained throughout a character of spontaneity, in the sense that it had no permanent organization. Rather, organizational needs—for example governing how to communicate, what to do the next day, what to call that day, how to evacuate the injured, how to repulse *baltagiyya* assaults, and even how to formulate demands—emerged in the field directly and continued to develop in response to new situations. Further, the

revolution lacked recognized leadership from beginning to end, a fact that seemed to matter greatly to observers but not to participants. I saw several debates in which participants strongly resisted being represented by any existing group or leader, just as they resisted demands that they produce “representatives” that someone, such as al-Azhar or the government, could talk to. When the government asked that someone be designated as a spokesperson for this revolt, many participants flippantly designated one of the disappeared, in the hope that being so designated might hasten his reappearance. A common statement I heard was that it was “the people” who decide. It appeared that the idea of peoplehood was now assumed to be either too grand to be representable by any concrete authority or leadership, or that such representation would dilute the profound, almost spiritual, implication of the notion of “the people” as a whole being on the move.

Spontaneity was a key element also because it made the Revolution hard to predict or control; and because it provided for an unusual level of dynamism and lightness—so long as many millions remained completely committed to a collective priority of bringing down the regime, represented by its president. But it also appeared that spontaneity played a therapeutic and not simply organizational or ideological role. More than one participant mentioned to me how the revolution was psychologically liberating, because all the repression that they had internalized as self-criticism and perception of inborn weakness, was in the revolutionary climate turned outwards as positive energy and a discovery of self-worth, real rather than superficial connectedness to others, and limitless power to change the frozen reality. I heard the term “awakening” being used endlessly to describe the movement as a whole as a sort of spontaneous emergence out of a condition of deep slumber, which no party program had been able to shake off before.

Further, spontaneity was responsible, it seems, for the increasing ceiling of the goals of the uprising, from basic reform demands on January 25, to changing the entire regime three days later, to rejecting all concessions made by the regime while Mubarak was in office, to putting Mubarak on trial. Removing Mubarak was in fact not anyone’s serious demand on January 25, when the relevant slogans condemned the possible candidacy of his son, and called on Mubarak himself simply not to run again. But by the end of the day on January 28, the immediate removal of Mubarak from office had become an unwavering principle, and indeed it seemed then that it was about to happen. Here one found out what was possible through spontaneous movement rather than a fixed program, organization or leadership. Spontaneity thus became the compass of the Revolution and the way by which it found its way to what turned out to be its radical destination.

It proved therefore difficult to persuade protestors to give up the spontaneous character of the Revolution, since spontaneity had already proved its power. Spontaneity thus produced more confidence than any other style of movement, and out of that confidence there emerged, as far as I could see, protestors’ preparedness for sacrifice and martyrdom. Spontaneity also appeared as a way by which the carnivalesque character of social life was brought to the theater of the revolution as a way of expressing freedom and initiative; for example, among the thousands of signs I saw in demonstrations, there were hardly any standard ones (as one would see in pro-government demonstration). Rather, the vast majority of signs were individual and hand-made, written or drawn on all kinds of materials and objects, and were proudly displayed by their authors who wished to have them photographed by others. Spontaneity, further, proved highly useful for networking, since the Revolution became essentially an extension of the spontaneous character of everyday life, where little detailed planning was needed or possible, and in which most people were already used to spontaneous networking amidst common everyday unpredictability that prevailed in ordinary times.



But while spontaneity provided the Revolution with many of its elements of success, it also meant that the transition to a new order would be engineered by existing forces within the regime and the organized opposition, since the millions in the streets had no single force that could represent them. Most protestors I talked to, however, seemed less concerned about those details than with the fulfillment of the basic demands, which, it appeared, guaranteed the more just nature of any subsequent system. As finally elaborated a week after the beginning of the Revolution, these demands had become the following: removing the dictator; dissolving the parliament and electing a new one; amending the constitution so as to reduce presidential power and guarantee more liberties; abolishing the state of emergency; and putting on trial corrupt high officials as well as all those who had ordered the shooting of demonstrators.

Third, remarkable was the virtual replacement of religious references by civic ethics that were presumed to be universal and self-evident. This development appears more surprising than in the case of Tunisia, since in Egypt the religious opposition had always been strong and reached virtually all sectors of life. The Muslim Brotherhood itself joined after the beginning of the protests, and like all other organized political forces in the country seemed taken aback by the developments and unable to direct them, as much as the government (along with

its regional allies) sought to magnify its role.

This, I think, is substantially connected to the two elements mentioned previously, spontaneity and marginality. Both of those processes entailed the politicization of otherwise unengaged segments, and also corresponded to broad demands that required no religious language in particular. In fact, religion appeared as an obstacle, especially in light of the recent sectarian tensions in Egypt, and it contradicted the emergent character of the Revolution as being above all dividing lines in society, including one’s religion or religiosity. Many people prayed in public, of course, but I never saw anyone being pressured or even asked to join them, in spite of the high spiritual overtones of an atmosphere saturated with deep emotions and constantly reinforced by stories of martyrdom, injustice, and violence.

As in the Tunisian Revolution, in Egypt the rebellion erupted as a sort of collective moral earthquake—where the central demands were very basic, and clustered around the respect for the citizen, dignity, and the natural right to participate in the making of the system that ruled over the person. If those same principles had been expressed in religious language before, now they were expressed as is and without any mystification or need for divine authority to justify them. I saw the significance of this transformation when even Muslim Brotherhood participants chanted at certain times with everyone else for a “civic” (*madaniyya*) state—*explicitly* distinguished from two other possible alternatives: religious (*diniyya*) or military (*askariyya*) state.

Fourth, a striking development after January 28 was the fact that radical political demands were so elevated that all other grievances—including those concerning dismal economic conditions—remained subordinate to them. The political demands were more clear than any other kinds of demands; everyone agreed on them; and everyone shared the assumption that all other problems could be negotiated better once one had a responsible political system in place. Thus combating corruption, a central theme, was one way by which all economic grievances were translated into easily understandable political language. And in any case, it corresponded to reality because the political system had basically become a system of thievery in plain daylight. Concerning the months before the revolution, virtually everyone had a story to tell me about the ostentatious corruption of the business-cum-political elite that benefited most from the system. Those tended to be a clique clustering around Mubarak’s son. Some of its members, reportedly, stood behind the recruitment of thugs who terrorized the protestors for two long days and nights on February 2-3.

Fifth, as everywhere in the Arab World, a key contributing factor was autocratic deafness. The massive undercurrent of resentment that fueled this volcano was stoked over years by the ruling elites themselves, who out of longevity in office and lack of meaningful opposition completely lost track of who their people were and could no longer read them, so to speak. They heard no simmering noise before the Revolution, and when it erupted they were slow to hear it as anything other than undifferentiated noise. The one-way direction of autocratic communication allowed for no feedback and presented every recipient of its directives as either audience or point of incoherent noise. Throughout the Revolution, this deafness of ruling structures was evident in the slow and uncertain

nature of government response. On the day following the January 25 demonstrations, editors of government newspapers belittled the events. On January 28, when all Egypt was in flames and many world leaders had issued some statement of concern, the Egyptian government remained completely silent—until Mubarak finally spoke at midnight, saying the exact opposite of what everyone had been expecting him to say. He thought he was making a major concession, but one which—as any intelligent advisor would have told him—could only be interpreted as a provocation, resulting in sparking several more days of protests. Then on February 1 he made another speech, again thinking that he was making major concessions, although again, it was received by many protestors as the height of arrogance. On his last day in office, February 10, he outraged almost everyone in the country when, rather than resigning as everyone had been expecting, he simply delegated his powers temporarily to his now equally hated vice president. Enormous crowds converged on the streets and reached the presidential palace on February 11, and the whole country appeared now determined to extract vengeance on a man so out of touch with such an unmistakably obvious popular will.

He was, in a sense, always responding to what he must have understood as incoherent noise, emerging from undifferentiated masses that could be allayed by the appearance of compromise. Arab state autocracies had long been accustomed to approach their people with either contempt or condescension. They were no longer skilled at any other art of communication (although Ahmad Shafiq, the new prime minister, has been trying to do his best in those arts). Clearly, autocratic deafness was a major factor in escalating the revolution. Many protestors suggested to me that what Mubarak said on January 28 would have resolved the crisis had he said it on January 25, when he said nothing. What he said on February 1 would also have resolved the crisis, had he said it on January 28. And what he said on February 10 meant that there would no longer be an honorable exit to the man who just a couple weeks before appeared to be the strongest man in the Middle East.

When none of these concessions succeeded in defusing the crisis, Mubarak's new appointees had no serious arguments to explain why he wanted to stay in power for just a few more months, and in the face of a determined revolt that did not in fact challenge many other parts of the system. On Feb. 3 his new prime minister said that it was not common in Egyptian culture for a leader to leave without his dignity. He cited as evidence the salute given to King Farouk as the free officers forced him to leave Egypt in 1952! And on the same day, his new vice president opined that it is against the character of Egyptian culture to so insult the character of the father, which he claimed (in a moment of forgetfulness of the revolution just outside) Mubarak was to the Egyptian people. And the president himself asserted on that same day that he could not possibly resign, since otherwise the country would descend into chaos—astonishingly, still not realizing what everyone else did: that the country was already there.

In the absence of autocratic deafness, all successful politicians, including manipulative ones, know that one art of maneuver consists of anticipating your audience's or enemy's next step, so that you are already there before it is too late. Here we had the exact opposite situation: a lethargic autocracy, having never known serious contest, was unaware of who its enemies had become, which in this case was more or less the vast majority of the country. That on February 2 some of Mubarak's supporters found nothing better to do than send thugs on camels and horses to disperse the crowd at Tahrir, seemed to reflect the regime's antiquated character: a regime from a bygone era, with no grasp of the moment at hand. It was as if a rupture in time had happened, and we were witnessing a battle from the 12th century. From my perspective in the crowd, it was as if they rode through and were swallowed right back into the fold that returned them to the past. By contrast, popular committees in the neighborhood, with their rudimentary weapons and total absence of illusions, represented what society had already become with this revolution: a real body, controlling its present with its own hands, and learning that it could likewise make a future itself, in the present and from below. At this moment, out of the dead weight of decades of inwardness and self-contempt, there emerged spontaneous order out of chaos. That fact, rather than detached patriarchal condescension, appeared to represent the very best hope for the dawn of a new civic order.

Finally, the geopolitical implications of this event are likely to be profound, regardless of how the revolution proceeds beyond this point. After two revolutions in short order in Tunisia and Egypt; expressions of mass discontent in Algeria, Jordan, and Yemen; and an announcement of impending political reforms in Syria; it is clear that we are witnessing the birth of a new Arab world. There is a palpable sense of confidence by ordinary people throughout the region, and deep, collective resentment of ruling elites. Arab governments have in recent decades sought to consolidate their autocratic rule, while fostering an unusual level of corruption in which political and business elites exchanged favors openly and without the slightest accountability, at a time when their population was becoming more economically vulnerable, more politically excluded, but also more educated and connected via new media.

The direction of this change is toward a more democratic region. This development, however, has always been unsettling for some policymakers in the US, but especially Israel, which has always preferred autocratic leaders who could impose "peace" rather than governments emerging out of democratic processes that could not be predicted or controlled by outside powers. Israeli Prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu has so far represented the most hysterical reaction in the world to this democratic development, warning about the ensuing decline of the West and calling for supporting Mubarak at all costs, implying the need to repress the revolt by massive force. His position is that democracy in Egypt would only produce another Iran. Thus according to this logic, dictatorship is the only way to rule unruly, dangerous Arabs. But fortunately Netanyahu appears thus far alone among world leaders in his retrograde posture.

The US has been seeking to play a complex game amidst these developments, which it did not anticipate and cannot control. The realistic assessment of the Obama administration, thus far, is that the democratic trend is probably irreversible, so the goal becomes how to orchestrate a transition without endangering "stability" in the region as a whole. But of course we need to know what is meant here, since this discourse of "instability" among US policymakers has often meant something far more specific: the likelihood that democracy in the Arab world might provide opponents of US policies a chance to come to power. However, opponents to US policies tend to be primarily so largely in so far as undemocratic regimes allied to the US have excluded them from power, precisely in the name of "stability." The age of this "stability" is over.

But an important lesson that needs to be firmly learned from these events is that asking questions about regional implications *first* is definitely the wrong approach. The masses in the streets of Egypt now are not a "mob" out to eliminate the West, only to demand their right to make their own system. Whatever anti-US slogans are there now on the ground are usually expressed in the context of denouncing US support over many decades for regimes that had served US interests so well, and in exchange were allowed to repress their own people in the name of regional stability. But that pattern, as we see so clearly now in Egypt, has only resulted in building a massive structure of instability—a natural feature of systems based entirely on repression and exclusion. Stability, in the final analysis, will emerge only out of the noticeable civic character of this profound revolution of the repressed and excluded.

*Mohammed A. Bamyeh teaches sociology at The University of Pittsburgh. He is the author of [Anarchy as Order: The History and Future of Civic Humanity](#) and the forthcoming *Intellectuals and Civil Society in the Middle East: Liberalism, Modernity and Political Discourse*. Text and photographs by the author. Updated February 11, 2011.*

*Recommended citation: Mohammed A. Bamyeh, *The Egyptian Revolution: First Impressions from the Field*, *The Asia-Pacific Journal* Vol 9, Issue 7 No 1, February 14, 2011.*