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Section 057

Bridging the Divide: Examining the Effectiveness of the Arab Spring in Egypt Through an Intersectional Lens

Egypt's history throughout the 20th century is characterized by authoritarian leadership and punctuated by violent transitions of power, including Hosni Mubarak's rise to power in 1981. Throughout his 30-year reign, Mubarak upheld a state of emergency in order to seize more power over the government[1], formed the CSF (Central Security Forces, a privatized police force loyal to his regime and known for their violence against civilians) and groomed his son Gamal to succeed him as dictator. Mubarak's neoliberal approach to economic reform facilitated the country's exponentially growing civilian wealth gap and led to continued popular opposition in different sectors of Egyptian society. Over the years labor unions, religious and political groups, and youth organizations held protests against economic injustices and the overall corruption of the Mubarak regime, usually shut down violently by Mubarak's police and hired street thugs. Isolated acts of violence part of a larger pattern also fueled revolutionary sentiment among Egyptians, such as the murder of 28-year-old Khaled Said, inspiring the Facebook group *We are all Khaled Said* that rallied around his death and called for the January 25th protests that sparked the revolution. Despite continued state violence, the protests launched as intended on Egypt's Police Day, a national holiday honoring Egyptian police who fought and died for Egypt's independence from the British Empire. The intentional timing of the protests on a holiday meant

[1] Dunne, Charles W, "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Autocrats: Key Strategies That Beat Down the Arab Spring and Keep Regimes in Power," *Arab Center Washington DC* (March 31, 2021): 6.

to honor the police, the strong arm of the regime, relayed an impactful message: civilians would not accept a holiday honoring their oppressor. While Said's death may have been the tipping point in popular frustration, it was hardly the only reason for the protests. It was simply the basis on which they took a stand against years of oppression under the Mubarak regime. The occupation of Tahrir Square created a shared space from which emerged a collective perceptual shift across intersectional divides, from learned helplessness in the face of authority to a collective feeling of empowerment.

Egyptian protesters experienced firsthand the physical injustice and violation of police brutality en masse in a shared space. While the use of excessive force against civilians was commonplace under the Mubarak regime, the unique circumstances in Tahrir square inflamed protesters' revolutionary sentiments, provoking an unprecedented display of interpersonal unity in their physical resistance against police who tried to attack them, not only during the initial Police Day protests but other atrocities, namely the Battle of the Camels and the Maspero massacre, which occurred in the months that followed."Unique circumstances" in the case of Tahrir refers to the intersectional alliances between groups of different religions, class standings, and ideologies in protest against the regime. This large-scale cooperation between groups who are so often divided by prejudice and mistrust for one another proved to be a powerful tool for dismantling state violence, the status quo of the Mubarak regime. The true turning point in the revolution occurred when protesters found courage and inspiration in one another's differences and recognized their shared struggle for equality despite societal differences exploited by the government. Such collective dissatisfaction is understandable when one considers the fact that the regime's oppression is all-consuming. No ordinary Egyptian is spared from the clutches of neoliberalism and political oppression. The economic divide only exacerbated the societally

divisive power the Mubarak regime held over its citizens, effectively exploiting and stoking the flames of prejudice between groups and demonizing opposing political movements through media control and propaganda.

The personal account of Egyptian citizen and longtime Cairo resident Adel Abdel Ghafar provides a direct window into protesters' experience of police brutality and the shift in perspective that drove them to fight back, and successfully intimidate the CSF to the point of retreat. He describes the terror he and the other protesters in Tahrir felt as riot police unleashed tear gas and rubber bullets into the crowd, and how he and the rest of the crowd ran as their fellows were beaten with batons on the January 25th protest.[2] To run from inherent danger is, obviously, a deeply ingrained instinct in all human beings that is difficult to overcome; therefore, it is logical that the police would adopt such a tactic under a regime that rules by fear. The exceptional aspect of Ghafar's account is that the protesters did not continue to run. Ghafar introduces that pivotal moment with a quote from another protestor: "Suddenly, a man next to me stops and shouts, 'Do not run! Egyptians, when will you stop running away? Turn around and let's face them once and for all!' He grabs my shirt, and I stop. I grab the shirt of the person next to me, and he stops. Slowly, our entire group comes to a halt."[3] At that moment, a chain reaction of individual actions between protesters stopped the wave of mass panic incited by police. Rhetorically, by calling the panicked crowd "Egyptians," the protester who grabbed Ghafar's shirt promotes unity between individuals by using a label they can all identify with. The simple, yet provocative wording of the challenge he issued to his fellows not to run not only provided grounding instruction amidst the panic but also invoked a sense of pride, a desire to rise up and overcome what forced them to scatter. Additionally, the physical action of each protester

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[2] Alsaleh, Asaad, *Voices of the Arab Spring: Personal Stories From the Arab Revolutions*, New York: Columbia University Press, (2015): 55, EBSCOhost #944984.
[3] Alsaleh 55

grabbing the shirt of the other, one by one, effectively formed a unified, despite being physically vulnerable, force against the police. The effect of this unexpected display of physical resistance by so many individuals at the risk of injury or even death, rendered the police, as Ghafar puts it, "psychologically broken," and when protesters then actively began fighting back, forced them to retreat.[4] Protester's personal and collective sentiments of pride in their Egyptian identity allowed them to put aside any mistrust between them at that moment and harness the power of their physical presence in Tahrir to transcend the long-held fear beaten into them by the regime and directly fight back against it.

The courage that protesters in Tahrir found in their solidarity with one another is put into perspective when one thinks about the level of risk each individual faced by choosing to stand with the group against the police and put their trust in strangers of all different backgrounds. After the public focus on famous martyrs, especially Khaled Said, and then witnessing their peers beaten to death[5] by police, they knew they were risking their lives by choosing not to flee. This willingness to die for the cause of the revolution made popular performative declarations by protesters that they, too, would become martyrs. Some would attend protests in funeral shrouds[6], holding signs that said "martyr available here,"[7] and others displayed pictures of famous martyrs killed directly or indirectly by the regime, along with empty frames containing question marks to signify "future martyrs," those who had not yet died for the revolution.[8] There are many nuances that come with someone claiming they are ready to die for a cause, as examined by anthropologist Amira Mittermaier in her introduction to "Death and Martyrdom in the Arab Uprisings," such as the difference between simply claiming willingness to die as opposed to

[4] Alsaleh 59
[5] Alsaleh 55
[6] Mittermaier, Amira, "Death and Martyrdom in the Arab Uprisings: An Introduction," *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* vol. 80 no. 5 (Dec 2015): 585, Academic Search Ultimate, ID# 108931974.
[7] Mittermaier 592
[8] Mittermaier 586

actually dying.[9] However, the fact remains that by protesting at all, and certainly by physically fighting back against police, protesters knowingly put themselves at risk of being killed. To show up and protest was to put oneself at the same risk as every other person present in Tahrir, notwithstanding any difference in religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or any other divide that would otherwise be in effect. The provocative power of the phrase "we are all Khaled Said" illustrated to the protesters that sectarian divides had no place in protests where all members recognized and embraced the chance of death equally.

Perceived equality and unity between different religious groups under the Mubarak regime were typically low; relations between Muslims and Coptic Christians were punctuated by mistrust. Mubarak's demonization and denouncement of certain Islamic groups effectively spread mistrust of Muslims among Egypt's Coptic Christian minority, ensuring the two religious groups would not unite against him as long as the Copts felt they needed the government's protection from the country's 90% Muslim majority.[10] Historically, the Mubarak regime has harnessed Islam as a political tool, giving clerics the right to a platform on public television as long as they encouraged public obedience to the regime and scapegoating Islamist political groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood as violent extremists. Violent struggles between religious sects, namely the Sunni and Shi'a, are commonly exploited by regimes of the Arab world. In the cases of Bahrain and Syria, for example, civilians of their respective religious majority sects rebelled against the minority-ruled regimes, while civilians of the minority sects remained loyal out of fear of the majority. However, this was not the case in Egypt. The solidarity and trust displayed between both Muslim and Copt protesters in Tahrir square was remarkable considering how routinely the divide between them was weaponized by the regime.

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[9] Mittermaier 592

[10] Aslam, Ali,"Salat-Al-Juma: Organizing the Public in Tahrir Square," *Social Movement Studies* vol, 16 no. 3 (May 2017): 305, Academic Search Ultimate, ID# 121746383.

Why, then, did the Copts participate in protests against Mubarak, a man who routinely reminded them of their vulnerability to "Islamist terrorists" and established himself as their defender?

Political theorist Ali Aslam argues that the act of public prayer during the occupation of Tahrir established a general sentiment of community and religious unity between the two groups, invoking a shared sense of courage and camaraderie to replace the mistrust they had previously learned to have for one another. By many accounts, a spectator of the protests would not even be able to tell the difference between a Christian, a Muslim, or a secular Egyptian participating in group prayer in Tahrir, whether it be Salat-al-Juma or Coptic mass.[11] There is inherent power in a group of thousands of people gathering in a shared space. As the cliche goes, there is strength in numbers. Not only do larger numbers of protestors increase the individual's courage to stand up to the state because of physical protection, but also the awareness of other beings, with their own consciousness and reasoning, are present and believe in the same causes. The more people show up to protest, the more legitimate the protest appears to society. This shared sentiment of legitimacy is what emboldens thousands of individual protestors to stand up to the authority of the police officers, despite that authority being legitimized by their violence. In the words of philosopher Judith Butler:

> Sleeping on that pavement was not only a way to lay claim to the public, to contest the legitimacy of the state, but also quite clearly, a way to put the body on the line in its insistence, obduracy and precarity, overcoming the distinction between public and private for the time of revolution. In other words, it was only when those needs that are supposed to remain private came out into the day and night of the square, formed into image and discourse for the media, did it finally become possible to extend the space and time of the event with such tenacity to bring the regime down.[12]

To put this in context, Butler gave an extensive lecture on the profound impact that occupation of a public space has on the perceived legitimacy of a public protest, as well as opening an avenue

[11] Aslam 304
[12] Butler, Judith, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street, *Transversal Texts* (Sept 2011): 12.

for securing human rights that were previously denied. To put it simply, Butler argues that occupation asserts a group's right to exist and be heard in the public sphere. To apply Butler's argument in the context of intersectionality, consider the concept of vulnerability. Protesters of all classes, religions, and other identities in Tahrir Square not only partook in the physically vulnerable acts of sleeping, eating, and hygienic functions during the occupation, but also the spiritually and emotional act of prayer, analyzed by Aslam. Egyptians came together in person and, for a time, collectively partook in one another's private and spiritual lives. Muslims and Copts who previously only saw one another as the "other" and were taught by government propaganda to fear one another lived together on the shared ground of Tahrir Square, and remained vulnerable to a common enemy; the police. Without the government smokescreen that divided them, protesters were able to trust one another due to the harsh circumstances they had to collectively endure, and were able to gain a sense of solidarity and legitimacy in their cause simply because of their shared fate with so many Egyptians they would likely never have interacted with in their daily lives.

Intersectional unity, especially such a widespread and significant display of it, is often not only a driving force for the people directly involved in the political action, but also for onlookers witnessing the protests on the streets or even through the media. The formation of alliances between socioeconomic groups, whatever they may be, against an enemy with as powerful a reach as their own government signifies the birth of a new outlook, a new, shared problem the public must face. As Aslam puts it:

> As public spectacle the prayers demanded response from viewers, who had to negotiate whether or not they identified with the worshippers and protestors. The prayers constituted an event that had the potential to bind the viewers and participants into a public with shared concerns and aspirations.[13]

[13] Aslam 304

The heat of a revolutionary moment holds tremendous potential to reshape a state's political landscape drastically, due to the direct action of a large, unified, and diverse group of civilians demanding political change. Egyptians witnessed and celebrated that change when Mubarak stepped down after 18 days of protests on February 11, 2011. But what happens after the head of a regime is defeated? While it is a short-term victory, the rest of the institution remains intact. Egypt continues to be a corrupt military state despite the resignation of Mubarak, only now ruled by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who recently had the constitution amended so he could run for another term as president.[14] The lack of motivation from the public to continue to work towards political reform post-revolution frustrates activists who recognize the need to continue political organizing and grassroots work to help those who are still disenfranchised due to the regime.[15] It simply isn't practical to maintain the proximity, urgency and vulnerability that existed between protesters at the beginning of the uprising and captured the attention of the Egyptian media, public, and the rest of the world. So, the question becomes, how does one stress the importance of the revolution to people who are not directly confronted by it, who choose not to engage in political advocacy the way key political organizers feel compelled to? There is no easy answer.

Political organizer Alaa Abd El-Fattah is yet another example of the lack of long-term, meaningful progress towards democracy in the Egyptian government, as he has been imprisoned for much of the past decade even after the fall of Mubarak for his progressive ideology and outspoken writings criticizing the government. In his December 2011 essay written from his cell titled "Half an Hour With Khaled," he attempted to appeal to a shared sense of shared national pride across the diverse span of the Egyptian public. shortly after the birth of his son Khaled. El-Fattah acknowledges conditions in Tahrir and other protest sites are not compatible with

[14] Dunne 2
[15] Mittermaier 599

everyday life; as he puts it, "Egypt is not the square."[16] If, then, another Tahrir cannot reasonably be created, how can ordinary people transform their everyday lives, the spaces in which they simply exist and coexist, into a factory (so to speak) for political revolution? El-Fattah expands:

> The country is what we love and what we live for; what we celebrate and what we mourn. If the state falls, more than just the square will remain—there will be the love of strangers, there will be everything that drove us to the square, and everything we learned in the square. Love is Khaled and sorrow is Khaled and the square is Khaled and the martyr is Khaled and the country is Khaled. As for their state, it is for an hour. Just an hour.[17]

Essentially, El-Fattah's point demonstrates that even with the current failure of the revolution, the understanding, trust, and connection between strangers is the key to keeping the spirit of the revolution alive- that trust between Egyptians is what truly makes up the country of Egypt, rather than the state, which is temporary and does not define Egypt as a country. This thought process takes on a similar message to that of Judith Butler: it is the relationship between individuals that form a collective group with a collective will, and that will is what defines and transforms temporality, a shared space, a shared country.

Revolutionary sentiment comes in unpredictable waves as measured by popularity with the general public, as much as it is tiresome for full-time revolutionaries to endure and push for a more consistent movement for progress and democracy. However, in Egypt in beyond, when groups of people come to recognize the overlap between their own oppression and that of the "other" and overlook social mistrust and divides orchestrated by governments and institution in order to keep themselves in power, their dissatisfaction with those in power will be more mobilized and charged than before. The ability between a group of people to relate to one another facilitates mutual trust and a feeling of empowerment that is both infectious to the

[16] El-Fattah, Alaa Abd, *You Have Not Yet Been Defeated*, New York: Seven Stories Press, (2022): 85.
[17] El-Fattah 86

general public and, if maintained for long periods, potentially the most impactful way to dismantle authoritarianism. The revolution in Egypt may be stalled, but there is always potential for reignition.

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