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## Middle East Research and Information Project

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### The Praxis of the Egyptian Revolution

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If there was ever to be a popular uprising against autocratic rule, it should not have come in Egypt. The regime of President Hosni Mubarak was the quintessential case of durable authoritarianism. "Our assessment is that the Egyptian government is stable and is looking for ways to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people," said Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on January 25, 2011. [\[1\] \(# 1\)](#) With these words, Clinton gave voice to a common understanding of Egypt under Mubarak. Government officials, pundits and academics, foreign and domestic, thought the regime was resilient -- not because it used brute force or Orwellian propaganda, but because it had shrewdly constructed a simulacrum of politics. Parties, elections and civic associations were allowed but carefully controlled, providing space for just enough participatory politics to keep people busy without threatening regime dominance.

Mubarak's own party was a cohesive machine, organizing intramural competition among elites. The media was relatively free, giving vent to popular frustrations. And even the wave of protest that began to swell in 2000 was interpreted as another index of the regime's skill in managing, rather than suppressing, dissent. Fundamentally, Egypt's rulers were smart authoritarians who had their house in order. Yet they were toppled by an 18-day popular revolt.

Three main explanations have emerged to make sense of this conundrum: technology, Tunisia and tribulation. Technological analyses celebrate young people who employed new media to defeat a stolid autocrat. By the second day of the Egyptian uprising, CNN correspondent Ben Wedeman was calling it a "very techie revolution." In the following days, every major news outlet framed the uprising as the work of wired, savvy twenty-somethings awakening the liberating potential of Facebook, Twitter and the writings of American intellectual Gene Sharp. "For the world's despots, his ideas can be fatal," asserted the *New York Times* of Sharp. [\[2\] \(# 2\)](#) A second category of explanation credits the Tunisian people's ouster of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in mid-January with supplying a shining example to follow. Esam Al-Amin notes that the Tunisian revolution "inspired Egyptians beyond the activists or elites." [\[3\] \(# 3\)](#) A third theorem focuses on the many tribulations afflicting Egyptians, particularly soaring commodity prices, positing that hardship finally pushed the population to rise up against oppression. "Food: What's Really Behind the Unrest in Egypt," one Canadian newspaper headlined its story. [\[4\] \(# 4\)](#)

None of these explanations are false. All of them correspond to interpretations of events forwarded by the participants themselves. And each has an impeccable intellectual pedigree, harkening back to two influential traditions in the study of popular collective action. One is the dramaturgical model, identifying a cast of self-propelled characters, armed with courage and a new consciousness, who then make an uprising. The second is the grievance model, by which an accumulation of social troubles steadily diffuses among the population and finally reaches an unforeseeable tipping point. The two models call attention to distinct but equally important forces: specific actors and generalized complaints. But both are oddly without context. Because aggrieved and heroic people exist under every type of political system, the models do not explain when such people will band together to challenge the conditions they deplore.

Egypt's momentous uprising did not happen because Egyptians willed it into being. It happened because there was a sudden change in the balance of resources between rulers and ruled. Mubarak's structures of dominion were thought to be foolproof, and for 30 years they were. What shifted the balance away from the regime were four continuous days of street fighting, January 25-28, that pitted the people against police all over the country. That battle converted a familiar, predictable episode into a revolutionary situation. Decades ago, Charles Tilly observed that one of the ways revolutions happen is that the efficiency of government coercion deteriorates. That decline occurs "when the character, organization and daily routines of the population to be controlled change rapidly." [\[5\] \(# 5\)](#) The organization and daily routines of the Egyptian population had undergone significant changes in the years preceding the revolt. By January 25, 2011, a strong regime faced a strong society versed in the politics of the street. In hindsight, it is simple to pick out the vulnerabilities of the Mubarak regime and arrange them in a neat list as the ingredients of breakdown. But that retrospective temptation misses the essential point: Egyptians overthrew a strong regime.

### Strong Regime, Strong Society

Like his predecessors, President Hosni Mubarak deployed the resources of a high-capacity state to cement his power. He handily eliminated all threats to his rule, from a riot police mutiny in 1986 to an armed Islamist insurgency in the 1990s to an over-ambitious deputy, Defense Minister 'Abd al-Halim Abu Ghazala, whom he sacked in 1989. He presided over the transformation of the economy from a command model with the state as primary owner to a neoliberal model with the state as conduit for the transfer of public assets to cronies. He introduced an innovation to the Egyptian authoritarian tradition as well, attempting to engineer the handover of presidential power to a blood relative, rather than a military subordinate. To manage social opposition to these big changes, Mubarak used the political arena to coopt critics and the coercive apparatus to deal with those who would not be incorporated.

Opposite this wily regime stood an ostensibly weak and fragmented society. Echoing the regime's own arguments, workers' protests, rural riots, electoral struggles and any other forms of popular striving were explained away as economic, not political; local, not national; and defensive, not proactive. The little people had no politics. Thus spoke the political scientist and Mubarak loyalist 'Ali al-Din Hilal to a US diplomat, who in a 2009 cable reported that Hilal said, "Widespread, politically motivated unrest was unlikely because it was not part of the 'Egyptian mentality.'" Independent academics shared his view: "There could be a poor people's revolt if the state fails to provide food. But we must bear in mind that Egyptians rarely explode and then only in specific cases, among them threats to their daily bread or national dignity." [\[6\] \(# 6\)](#)

The reality was that Egyptians had been practicing collective action for at least a decade, acquiring organizational experience in that very old form of politics: the street action. Egypt's streets had become parliaments, negotiating tables and battlegrounds rolled into one. To compel unresponsive officials to enact or revoke specific policies, citizens blockaded major roads with tree branches and burning tires; organized sit-ins in factory plants or outside ministry buildings; and blocked the motorcades of governors and ministers. Take this small event in the logbook of popular politics from January 2001, one of 49 protest events recorded that year by just one newspaper. Workers at the new Health Insurance hospital in Suez held a sit-in to protest the halt of their entitlement pay. State security officers and local officials intervened, prevailing upon the authorities to reinstate the pay and fire the hospital director. [\[7\] \(# 7\)](#) By 2008, there were hundreds of such protests every year, big and small. In June 2008, thousands of residents in the fishing town of Burg al-Burullus blocked a major highway for seven hours to protest the governor's abrupt decision to halt the direct distribution of flour to households.

Police used tear gas and batons to disperse demonstrators, and 90 people were arrested. [\[8\] \(# 8 \)](#)

If one classifies Egypt's protests by the type of mobilizing structure that brings people out into the street, rather than the content of their claims, three sectors are salient, each with its own repertoire of tactics. The first is workplace protest, including collective action by industrial laborers, by civil servants, students and by trade practitioners such as auto mechanics and gold traders. The second is neighborhood protest, whether on the scale of a single street or an entire town. Protests by Copts, Sinai Bedouins and farmers are often organized along residential lines. Associational protest is the third sector. The organizing mediums here are professional associations such as lawyers' and doctors' syndicates; social movements such as the pro-Palestine solidarity campaigns, the anti-Mubarak Kifaya movement and the April 6 youth group; and the youth wings of political parties such as Ayman Nour's liberal Ghad, the Muslim Brothers, the liberal-national Wafd, the Nasserist Karama and the Islamist Wasat.

Doing politics outdoors brought citizens face-to-face with the caste that rules the streets: Egypt's ubiquitous police. Mubarak's was not a police state because the coercive apparatus routinely beat and detained people. It was a police state because the coercive apparatus had become the chief administrative arm of the state, aggregating the functions of several agencies. Police not only deal with crime and issue passports, drivers' licenses, and birth and death certificates. They also resolve local conflicts over land and sectarian relations; fix all national and sub-national elections; vet graduate school candidates and academic appointments at every level; monitor shop floors and mediate worker-management conflicts; observe soccer games and Friday prayers; and maintain a network of local informants in poor neighborhoods, to ensure that dispossession is not converted into political organization. Officers are free to work out their own methods of revenue extraction, sometimes organizing the urban drug trade. [\[9\] \(# 9 \)](#) Patrolmen routinely collect tribute from taxi and microbus drivers and shopkeepers, while high-ranking officers partner with landowners or crony businessmen. When there is a riot or a road accident or a natural disaster, Egyptian police personnel are the first responders, not to aid the victims but to contain their rage.

By January 25, 2011, every protest sector had field experience with police rule, from Helwan University students to villagers in the Delta province of Daqhaliyya to Cairo lawyers to Aswan horse cart drivers. But no population group had come close to shifting the balance of resources in its favor, with the arguable exception of Sinai's Bedouins, who have been embroiled in fierce battles with police for years, ever since the Taba bombings in 2004 led to massive arrest campaigns targeting residents.

The first significant effort to link up Egypt's three protest sectors was easily aborted by the regime. On April 6, 2008, a loose coalition of Mahalla and Kafr al-Dawwar textile workers, town residents and groups in Cairo's associational landscape coordinated a general strike and national day of protest to demand a minimum wage and an end to corruption and police brutality. Riot police and state security officers dissolved the strike action at the Mahalla textile factory before it could take off. Then they easily broke up furious protests by thousands of Mahalla townspeople, lobbing tear gas canisters into crowds and arresting 150 residents. Smaller solidarity demonstrations in Greater Cairo were also effortlessly managed, and state security's plans succeeded in preventing the spread of protest to other provinces. But the event midwived the April 6 youth movement, which would be a key organizer of the January 25 action.

Street clashes continued between locals and police in various spots throughout 2010, with some incidents leading to mass arrests and curfews. Although the triggers of these confrontations were particular to time and place, both police and citizens drew upon remarkably similar sets of devices, from Akhmim in Upper Egypt to Rosetta in the Delta to 'Umraniyya in Greater Cairo. Two signal events embedded these local patterns of friction into a national framework. In June 2010, a young Alexandrian named Khalid Sa'id was hauled out of his chair at an Internet café and beaten to death by plainclothes police officers in broad daylight, reportedly in revenge for his posting of a video on YouTube that showed the officers divvying up the proceeds of a drug bust. Sa'id's death galvanized public opinion in disgust at police predation. Google executive Wael Ghoneim helped start a Facebook group called "We Are All Khalid Sa'id," and social movements organized several large demonstrations against police brutality at which the slogan "Leave! Leave!" was hurled at Husni Mubarak. The second occasion was the national legislative elections. Under complete police management, the elections in November-December 2010 were flagrantly rigged to return 97 percent of the seats for Mubarak's vehicle, the National Democratic Party (NDP). The elections outraged political elites and ordinary people alike, spurring a unified opposition protest on December 12, and leaving behind fresh memories of street battles in dozens of districts across the country.

By the time January 25, 2011 arrived, there was local resonance for the planned national "day of rage" in virtually every corner of Egypt. The political atmosphere was highly charged: Public opinion was inflamed by the Alexandria church bombing on January 1, which had led to numerous rumbles between police and Coptic protesters. The Tunisian people's toppling of Ben Ali electrified Egyptians. Riot police corralled a January 16 demonstration outside the Tunisian embassy, where activists had gathered to sing the Tunisian national anthem. Unwittingly, the regime itself provided the calendar date for the "day of rage," having newly designated January 25 a bank holiday to mark Police Day. The holiday freed up citizens for assembly, practically inviting them to convert the official celebration into a popular harangue against police rule. Several get-out-the-protest clips on YouTube strung together notorious scenes of police brutality captured by cell phone video cameras. Members of all protest sectors announced their participation, including Mahalla workers, Sinai Bedouins and civil servants employed by the cabinet. New actors joined in, such as hard-core fans of the two biggest national soccer teams and Khalid Sa'id's mother, who, in an interview uploaded by Nobel laureate Mohamed ElBaradei's reform campaign on January 21, also urged Egyptians to reclaim their rights in the streets. [\[10\] \(# 10 \)](#) The government felt compelled to counter-organize. State security officers warned Muslim Brothers in the provinces to stay home. NDP parliamentarians branded January 25 the "day of loyalty to the leader," paying for 500,000 posters featuring Mubarak's visage and pasting them in major squares. [\[11\] \(# 11 \)](#) The Coptic Church, seven tiny opposition parties, the Nasserist party and Sufi orders spoke out against the protest action. [\[12\] \(# 12 \)](#)

In the days before the "day of rage," a little-noted disturbance prefigured scenes that would soon pop up all over Egypt. One afternoon in the Nile-side working-class neighborhood of Warraq, a brawl erupted between two detainees at the police station. Officers violently put down the fight. The detainees then set fire to the blankets in the lock-up, and the blaze soon engulfed the station, injuring the Warraq head detective and his lieutenant. Armored cars and riot police were dispatched to the neighborhood, as rumors spread that a detainee had died in the fire. Hundreds of residents and detainees' relatives descended on the station and tried to push their way in, pelting the building with stones and breaking four window panes. By 2 am, the standoff had ended. The Giza police chief had arrived to negotiate with residents, allowing them in one by one to ascertain their relatives' safety. "My brother is wrongly imprisoned. They accused him of stealing a cell phone," a resident outside the station told a reporter. "One of the officers framed him." [\[13\] \(# 13 \)](#)

## Verdict of the Barricades

The January 25 protest started as a midsize demonstration and ended as a massive uprising against autocratic rule. But no one leaving their house that morning knew that they were stepping into the largest policing failure of Mubarak's tenure. The uprising was forged in the heat of street fighting, unanticipated both by its hopeful strategists and its watchful adversaries. "We went out to protest that day and expected to be arrested in the first ten minutes, just like usual," recalled Ziad al-'Ulaymi, an organizer with ElBaradei's campaign. [\[14\] \(# 14 \)](#) A lieutenant colonel in the riot police, who was monitoring events from the Cairo operations room, later noted, "Our preparations for January 25 were as per usual, and the instructions were not to molest demonstrators." [\[15\] \(# 15 \)](#)

Interior Minister Habib al-'Adli and his four lieutenants had met on January 24 to finalize their strategy. Cairo police chief Isma'il al-Sha'ir issued stern warnings through the media, threatening protesters with arrest and invoking the demonstrations law of 1914 requiring a permit for any public gathering of more than five persons. [16] (# 16 ) Giza police chief Usama al-Marasi deployed 12 riot police trucks on Arab League Street, the main thoroughfare of Cairo's western half, and 18 trucks outside Cairo University. The broad avenue and the campus were two of the pre-announced protest locations on the Facebook pages of the April 6 and Khalid Sa'id movements. For good measure, al-Marasi emplaced trucks along the entire stretch of the Warraq corniche. [17] (# 17 ) Outside Greater Cairo, police set up checkpoints along the approaches to the large Delta towns of Tanta and Mahalla, blocking the entry of delegations from Kafr al-Shaykh, Daqahliyya and Minoufiyya provinces that had been planned by protest organizers. Qalyoubiyya and Suez provinces were placed on high alert. Suez, in particular, had a recent history of troubles. In 2010, a high-ranking police general was assassinated in plain sight by a former informant, whose trial turned into an exposé of the gendarmerie's brutal methods. And the heavy police hand was evident again during the 2010 elections. "The polling stations are under occupation. Suez has been turned into a military garrison!" cried an irate poll monitor on voting day. [18] (# 18 )

Zero hour, as announced by protest organizers, was to be 2 pm. The stated plan was to demonstrate in front of the Interior Ministry and then disband at 5 pm. Security forces therefore sealed off all the vital downtown streets leading to and from the Ministry, allowing pedestrians to pass only after checking ID cards. But it was a ruse. On the morning of January 25, organizers used cell phones and landlines to disseminate the real locations of the protests and the actual start time: noon. "The protest locations announced on Facebook and to the press were the major landmarks. The idea was to start marching down small side streets and pick up people along the way, so that by the time demonstrators reached the announced locations, they would be large crowds that security couldn't corral," explained organizer al-'Ulaymi. [19] (# 19 )

The crafty tactic worked in some neighborhoods, but not in others. Envision a sizable Kifaya demonstration walking down a tiny, picturesque lane in the inter-confessional neighborhood of Shubra, calling on residents watching them from the balconies to come down and join. Actor 'Amr Wakid is there, demonstrators are waving Egyptian flags and veteran sloganeer Kamal Khalil is providing the soundtrack with his unique sing-song rhymes. [20] (# 20 ) By the time this group surged toward the announced rally point of Shubra Circle, they had collected 1,000 bodies and police officers had started to chase them. Khalil was arrested, and the other legendary sloganeer and seasoned unionist Kamal Abu Eita just barely escaped. "That's when I realized that Abu Eita runs much faster than me!" said thirty-something activist Ahmad 'Urabi of Abu Eita, who is nearly 60.

By that point at 2:30 pm, the Shubra people received calls and text messages that crowds were filling streets in the working-class neighborhoods of Boulaq, Imbaba and Bab al-Khalq, and that Arab League Street in middle-class Muhandisin was overflowing with people marching toward Tahrir Square downtown. So they individually hopped into taxis and headed for the square. Meanwhile, outside the High Court building near Tahrir, middle-aged opposition parliamentarians and tweedy professors were scuffling with riot police. Lawyers from the bar association nearby had broken through the cordon and were approaching, as was a third roving group passing by the Judges' Club around the corner and chanting over and over again, "Hurriyya! Hurriyya!" (Freedom! Freedom!). The police were disoriented by the convergence of the three formations. State security officers negotiated with parliamentarians, trying to convince them to persuade the crowds that they could chant as much as they liked but had to remain stationary on the High Court steps. But there was another logic at work. The bodies gleefully broke through the cordons and rushed toward Gala' Street and from there to 'Abd al-Mun'im Riyad Square abutting the Egyptian museum, a stone's throw from Tahrir.

While security forces were trying to contain the court demonstration, Ghad party leader Ayman Nour and Wafd party members Muhammad Shurdi and businessman Rami Lakah were fronting an energetic group of Wafdist youth speed-walking from Ramsis Street to the Nile corniche. A couple of hundred strong and each member carrying a green party flag, the procession plucked off bystanders as it moved along, making its way to the NDP headquarters where it stopped for some moments to denounce NDP leaders, promising them the fate of the Tunisian ex-president, Ben Ali. Before security forces could pen them in, a large group coming from the Qasr al-Nil bridge merged with the Wafdist and, together, they set off for the state radio and television building, completely encircling it for a few minutes with no security forces in sight. From there, they roamed the streets of Boulaq, reemerging at the intersection of Ramsis and July 26 Streets, and headed for Tahrir.

Nearby, on 'Abd al-Khalik Tharwat Street, Khalaf Muhammad Mursi, a 75-year old newspaper vendor, said, "Back in the days of the monarchy, I saw as many demonstrations as there are hairs on my head. Back then, they flipped over the trams and chanted against the king, and some of them wanted [Prime Minister Mustafa] Nahhas back in power. Demonstrating is good. They're marching and not doing anything wrong. The government should let them." [21] (# 21 )

In the provinces, there were also large demonstrations. Police containment varied in intensity, with some brigades tolerating the columns of protesters and others losing control of the crowds, as in Cairo. In Ismailiyya's Firdaws Square, police made rigorous preparations starting the night before. By early afternoon, rows of riot police were tightly hemming in 600 demonstrators, who were performing the afternoon prayers outdoors and shouting, "Chant it, chant it! Raise your voice high! He who chants will not die!" By 6 pm, more people had joined in, enabling the protesters to break free of the cordon and ramble through the city. The labor stronghold of Mahalla was a different matter, the two demonstrations there having been violently put down, with 11 arrests. Alexandria's squares and landmarks saw several simultaneous, separate protests. Police ringed a large crowd outside the governor's office, chanting for the dissolution of the rigged parliament and demanding an audience with the governor, who refused. In the al-Asafra neighborhood, a procession flowed toward NDP headquarters, fending off the "karate companies," the state security musclemen who disperse crowds by striking demonstrators.

Back in Tahrir, shortly before 4 pm, security forces were resisting demonstrators' surge toward the national legislative headquarters from two directions. In the square, high-octane crowds led by soccer fans exclaimed "Egypt! Egypt!" in army-like cadence. They repeatedly rushed the thick layers of conscripts blocking the way to Qasr al-'Ayni Street, which leads southwest in rough parallel with the Nile, passing by the houses of Parliament. When the protesters succeeded in breaking through, panicked officers went in hot pursuit, pushing the discombobulated lower ranks in front of them to rearrange them again in a human blockade before the people could reach the People's Assembly, as Egypt's lower house is called. From the other direction on Qasr al-'Ayni Street, a now iconic scene saw light-footed young men sparring with an armored vehicle. In the footage posted online (where it has upwards of 2 million views), one of them then positions himself directly in the path of the moving lorry as it spouts water from a cannon. He stands there defiantly, hands on hips and drenched, as the vehicle brakes and the videographers wildly cheer him on from a balcony above. [22] (# 22 )

By then, something extraordinary was happening. The thousands of demonstrators who had been wending their way through different parts of the city were streaming through all the approaches to the square. Poet and Baradei campaign leader 'Abd al-Rahman Yusuf was running from security forces through the labyrinthine streets of chic Garden City, home to the US and British embassies. He and his fellows approached the square from underneath the Qasr al-Nil bridge. "It was one of the most profound moments of my life. The sight of the square filled with tens of thousands heralded the long-awaited dawn. As we entered the square, the crowds installed there cheered the coming of a new battalion, greeting us with joy. I wept." [23] (# 23 )

In the orange glow left by a setting sun, a skirmish unfolded outside the upper house of Parliament. Demonstrators had inched their way to that spot by making iterated advances into riot police formations, breaking them apart and gaining a tad more ground each time. Protesters clambered atop a red fire truck, and their jubilant fellows began to sing the national anthem. Tense riot police commanders herded their troops. The black-helmeted conscripts jogged in place and emitted the rhythmic grunts of soldiers revving up for close combat. When the order was given, the troops rushed into the crowd. "*Silmiyya! Silmiyya!*" roared the demonstrators, exhorting each other to non-violence and holding their ground as the troops retreated into position. An enterprising civilian knocked over a white-and-blue sentry kiosk. His fellows rushed to help him roll it to the protesters' side; a barricade had been made. When hotheads in the crowd started hurling rocks at riot police, a chant rose up from both the front lines and cheerleaders on the sidelines, "No stones! No stones!" In this army, the commanders and the foot soldiers were one. [\[24\] \(# 24 \)](#)

Night fell, but the people stayed put in the square. Huge speakers were procured from nearby Bab al-Louq, and a people's broadcast service was set up. Angry monologues, poetry couplets and political demands were read out. A cardboard replica of a squat dictator hung from a lamppost. News was relayed that two citizens had died in Suez that day, solidifying resolve. Volunteers ranged across the square, collecting garbage in plastic bags. People built fires and danced around their light. Out of nowhere, food and blankets appeared, to the delighted claps and cries of the encampment. Memories of March 20–21, 2003 flitted through the minds of those who were there that evening, when the square was under the people's control for ten hours to express outrage at the US bombing of Baghdad. But on that occasion security forces had uprooted them by the next afternoon. Perhaps determined to avoid a reprise, the broadcast rallied everyone to spend this and every night in the square until their demands were met. As they had repeated over and over again throughout the day, they wanted: "Bread, freedom, social justice!" After sunset, as demonstrators realized their own power, this troika began to alternate with the Tunisian anthem: "The people want to overthrow the regime!" Reporters milled about, collecting stories. Sitting alone was Amal, a young nurse. Her friends had abandoned her, their parents refusing to let them join the demonstrations. Why did not her parents do the same? "My parents have passed away," she explained, "and I support five brothers and sisters. I'm here so that they can live a dignified life. I don't want them to be deprived because they're orphans." [\[25\] \(# 25 \)](#)

The riot police lieutenant colonel received the order at midnight. "The square had to be cleaned up," he recounted. "Absolutely no one was to spend the night there." The armored vehicles closed in, the riot troops were arrayed and the first tear gas canister was lobbed into the sit-in at 12:45 am. Nearly an hour later, following deployment of 200 vehicles, 50 public buses, 10,000 riot police and 3,000 special forces troopers, the people were expelled. Before scattering in all directions, knots of protesters encircled the vehicles that barged into the square at breakneck speed. A group ran to the NDP headquarters, where they smashed windows before being arrested. Another headed to the television building and blocked traffic in front of it. And a third group set fire to police kiosks and a police car near the 'Abd al-Mun'im Riyad bus depot. Holding up bloodied hands to the camera, one of the protesters said, "They shot at us! They shot at us! Who are we, the enemy?" [\[26\] \(# 26 \)](#)

### Mubarak's Worst Fears

Habib al-'Adli and his adjutants were concerned by the day's events, especially the synchronized diffusion of protests across the country, the fluidity of crowd movement in the two major cities and citizens' euphoric sense of the weak points of the police. As the operations room lieutenant colonel recalled, "What we saw on January 25 was an uprising, not a demonstration. A young man standing in front of an armored vehicle, jumping on it to strike it, falling off and then doing it again? Honestly, there was no fear." [\[27\] \(# 27 \)](#) Both the Cairo and Giza police chiefs were in the field all day on January 25, and they saw the electrifying empowerment that seemed to course through Egyptians' veins. Both were experienced, hands-on officers who had proved their mettle in dicey situations. Cairo police chief al-Sha'ir won al-'Adli's trust by handily managing the large 2006 protests in support of reformist judges. And Giza police chief al-Marasi had been the head state security officer in Suez, seat of a sparsely populated province with multiple coils of social tension, from labor strife to drug running to Bedouin tribes with serious grievances, all sitting at the southern mouth of the Suez Canal, the country's prime generator of external revenue.

In the early morning hours of January 26, preparations were swiftly made to secure downtown Cairo against another popular takeover. State security instructed all downtown businesses to close before 1 pm on January 26. The two underground Metro lines converging on the major transfer hub at Tahrir announced that trains would not be stopping at the station. Police sealed off four entrances to the station, and three entrances to the July 26 station one stop to the northeast, outside the High Court building. Two thousand undercover policemen fanned out in downtown streets and government installations, and al-Marasi ordered the placement of multiple checkpoints on Nahiya Street, through which thousands of people had streamed the day before onto the Arab League boulevard. Labor commissar Husayn Mugawir, whose job is to control workers through the sole official union federation, instructed all union heads in the provinces to be especially responsive to the rank and file, lest any incipient job action happen to lend the demonstrations strategic depth. [\[28\] \(# 28 \)](#)

These measures indicated that Mugawir's superiors were feeling the worst fears of an authoritarian regime. For a capable autocrat like Mubarak, large protests are no cause for anxiety. The fears are diffusion and linkage. Indeed, the diffusion of collective action in time and space emboldened Egyptians, signaling the unwillingness or incapacity of the coercive apparatus to suppress demonstrations. The simultaneity of protests across very different locations, especially the filling of streets in neighborhoods entirely unused to such processions, revised citizens' calculations of what was possible and reduced uncertainty about the consequences of action. The second fear is the coordination between the three organizational infrastructures of protest. Indeed, the state security directorate existed to frustrate precisely this bridge building. It had done so quite successfully with the April 6, 2008 general strike, and had a stellar track record in branding each sector of dissent with a different label: Associational protest was "political," but workplace and neighborhood protest was "economic."

The diffusion of protests on January 25–27 shattered both the mental and material divisions between Egypt's three protest sectors, forcing the regime to confront them simultaneously, when for 30 years it had done so serially. In Cairo, there was a spontaneous sit-in on the tracks at the July 26 Metro station, with demonstrators halting the train. In Boulaq, a moving crowd of 1,000 residents fought with police from early afternoon until past 2 am Friday morning, braving tear gas and rubber bullets, and setting up barricades on Gala' Street with dumpsters and carefully arranged burning tires. Undeterred by the traumatic routing of people from Tahrir Square, angry demonstrators by the hundreds continued to stride through the streets of downtown.

The picture in the provinces was much the same, with protesters refusing to empty the streets. Demonstrations in Daqhaliyya, Port Said and North Sinai demanded the release of those arrested on January 25; in Sinai, residents used their signature tactic of blockading the highway with burning tires. On the third day of protests, a young Sinai protester named Muhammad 'Atif was killed in clashes with police, making him the fourth casualty nationwide. In Alexandria, state security broke up a planned lawyers' protest on the Manshiya court steps, arresting the first 20 people who showed up. The next day, 200 lawyers returned and held their protest. In Qalyoubiyya, another 200 lawyers marched down the streets on January 26 inveighing against price hikes and the export of Egyptian natural gas to Israel, so police cooped them up in the courthouse the next day. And Mahalla was still under lockdown, with security forces importing

reinforcements to block renewed attempts by textile workers to start action. Percolating up from these varied locales was a decision to hold another round of protest on the next common-sense date: after Friday prayers on January 28, first dubbed "the Friday of the martyrs and the detained."

The situation in Suez developed rapidly. On January 25, security forces had been especially violent; the fighting resulted in 110 injuries and three deaths, as well as 54 arrests. The next day, hundreds of residents flocked to Suez General Hospital to donate blood, finding it so full that the injured were lying on sheets in hallways. Meanwhile, a large group of incensed relatives and citizens had gathered outside the morgue. The authorities insisted on handing over corpses without forensic reports, and security forces besieged the funerals with a ferocity that further enraged residents. "When you see this, you feel like you're in Palestine and Iraq," said the leftist Tagammu' parliamentarian for the city. "Security uses bullets and tear gas canisters and water hoses, and the residents can only confront this with stones." [29] (# 29 ) But residents escalated their tactics, setting fire to a police post and the municipal council building on January 26, and trying to burn down the local NDP office. On January 27, hundreds of residents and detainees' relatives demonstrated outside the Arba'in police station, chanting, "Enough! We want our kids!" Demonstrators hurled petrol bombs at the station and ignited several police cars.

On the evening of January 27, police and protesters each held planning meetings to plot the second act of the confrontation. Police officials devised a comprehensive scheme to cut off physical and virtual means of linkage. They ordered a shutdown of Internet and cellular phone service for the next day; cell phones were especially important for demonstrators to spread news of protest diffusion in real time, and to share spot instructions or eleventh-hour location changes. Cairo was sealed off from the provinces and put under lockdown. All of the arteries and bridges leading into Tahrir Square from east and west were closed to traffic -- even to pedestrians. Additional Metro stops were closed, not just the two nearest the square. And mosques were carefully primed in advance. The 'Umar Makram mosque in Tahrir was ordered shuttered. Friday preachers all over the country were instructed to deliver sermons denouncing assembly and disobedience of the ruler. At the Giza mosque where Mohamed ElBaradei was set to attend prayer before joining the protests, the preacher of 20 years was replaced with a government pick. For their part, the youth groups and opposition forces coordinating the protest added new locations and reacquainted themselves with landlines to cope with the cellular shutdown. Opposition parties who had sat out the January 25 action -- the Tagammu' leftists and the Nasserists -- scrambled to join up. And the Muslim Brothers threw their organizational weight behind the Friday gathering, revising their calculus of risk after seeing the momentous events of the previous three days. The players readied themselves, and the world watched.

On January 28, shortly after noon, a majestic scene unfolded all over Egypt. Grand processions of thousands upon thousands of people in every province made their way to the abodes of the oppressive forces that controlled their lives. Beckoning those watching from their windows, they chanted, "Our people, our people, come and join us!" When the crowds reached town and city centers, they encircled police stations, provincial government buildings and NDP headquarters, the triad of institutions emblematic of the regime. The syncopated chorus that had traveled from Sidi Bouzid to Tunis now shook the Egyptian earth: "The people...want...to overthrow the regime!"

In Tanta, 50,000 people blockaded a major highway, encircled the provincial government building and ripped down its billboards. In Kafr al-Dawwar, 25,000 did the same. In Damietta, the people called for the dissolution of Parliament, torching the NDP building and defacing the façade of the governor's offices. In Minya, whose governor had bragged that his middle Nile province had not seen demonstrations on January 25, people ignored the entreaties of the police chief and barricaded the Cairo-Aswan highway, braving rubber bullets to chant outside the NDP headquarters: "Corruption caused this country's destruction!"

Everywhere, the rising of the commons was met with superior force. Police fired tear gas canisters, rubber bullets and -- the ultimate escalation -- live ammunition. The goal, to be reached at any cost, was to prevent separate crowds of demonstrators from fusing together in city centers. State security commandeered ambulances to arrest the unsuspecting injured, and hospitals were pressured into falsifying the cause of death for demonstrators who were shot at close range. Residents provided first aid to demonstrators leery of getting into ambulances, and tossed water bottles, vinegar and onions (homemade tear gas remedies) to the civilians fighting below. On Ramsis Street in downtown Cairo, as a crowd of 10,000 crashed into a security formation and was hurled back with copious tear gas, a woman cried out from her balcony, "God be with you, men of Egypt!" [30] (# 30 )

Communications between Alexandrian field commanders that day record the shock and awe police experienced in Egypt's second city. "We are still engaging very large numbers coming from both directions. We need more gas," a squadron head radioed to a superior. "The people have barged in and burned a security vehicle. The situation here is beyond belief. I'm telling you, sir, beyond belief," says another. By mid-afternoon, Alexandrians had laid siege to three police stations. In other parts of the city, police had run out of ammunition and resorted to throwing stones. A high-ranking commander got on the line to sternly instruct a field officer, "Stop engaging and secure the police stations! You don't have sufficient forces to calmly engage these numbers. Go and batten down the hatches!" [31] (# 31 )

And Suez? Security forces had isolated the Canal town from the rest of the country, closing off all access points. Massive reinforcements had arrived daily since January 25. At 1 am on January 28, the top police brass met at the Arba'in police station, which only a few hours before had been ablaze, to set the plan for the "Friday of anger." The showdown in Suez started after noon prayers. Gen. Ashraf 'Abdallah, commander of the riot police in the Canal Zone, later prepared an internal report:

*After Friday prayers, no fewer than 5,000 people began a procession that was joined by large numbers of citizens from all mosques. The procession grew to 40,000 people, and the police chief ordered that it be allowed to proceed to the provincial capital building. Once there, the numbers exceeded 50,000. The masses remained outside the building for many hours, chanting hostile slogans. At the same time, large numbers of no less than 20,000 had gathered in front of the Arba'in police station and assaulted the forces with rocks and Molotov cocktails. The forces used only tear gas. Due to the density of the crowds, the forces were unable to deal with them. The crowds burned the station, released the detainees and burned all the police vehicles in the area, among them ten lorries and an armored car belonging to the Ismailiyya force. [32] (# 32 )*

In five compact hours, from noon to 5 pm, the police battled the people in all areas of the capital, desperate to thwart the amalgamation of multitudes in Tahrir Square. A climactic battle erupted on the Qasr al-Nil bridge, as surging crowds from the west sought to cross the river to join their brethren converging on Tahrir from the east. Qasr al-Nil has rightly been memorialized in word and video. [33] (# 33 ) But there was another climactic Cairo fight in the east, where at least 15 citizens died (the youngest of them aged 14) and ten troop carriers parked in a row burned. The battle of Matariyya Square, to the east of the suburb of Heliopolis, raged as police sought to stop residents from merging with crowds in the adjacent, densely populated 'Ayn Shams neighborhood. The people's insistent anthem, as outside Parliament on January 25, was "*Silmiyya! Silmiyya!*" and "No stones! No stones!" When police used overwhelming force, including live rounds, the people switched tactics, forming a barricade with overturned dumpsters, seizing the shields of riot police, and burning the vehicles and the police station. The mother of 'Imad al-Sa'idi, 24, killed by one bullet to the heart and one to the side, wondered, "If there was no way out for a policeman but to fire, then fire on his hand or his foot. But to shoot him

in the heart and end his life -- why?" [34] (# 34 )

The Egyptian uprising telescoped the daily encounters between people and police that had played out for more than ten years. Al-'Adli's police force did not melt away in the face of a popular onslaught. It fought for four straight days on nearly every street corner in every major city, before finally being rendered inefficient by the dynamism and stamina of exceptionally diverse crowds, each with their own know-how in the art of interfacing with gendarmes. At 5 pm on the afternoon of January 28, when reports started rolling in of police stations burning down, one after another, al-'Adli capitulated and ordered the removal of his forces from the streets. It was a sight unseen in modern Egyptian police rule -- the one and only time that Egypt's three protest subcultures were able to jointly defeat the coercive apparatus that had existed to keep them apart.

By the end of the street fighting, preliminary estimates were that 365 citizens had died and some 5,000 had been hurt. On the police side, there were 32 deaths and 1,079 injuries, while 99 police stations and 3,000 vehicles had burned. Al-'Adli stayed bunkered inside the Interior Ministry until January 31, when he was transported out sitting huddled in an army tank. In a six-hour interrogation by the prosecution, on charges of responsibility for the deaths and injuries, al-'Adli shunted blame upward and downward. He accused his four top assistants of providing him with false intelligence, and demanded that Husni Mubarak be held accountable for the decision to fire on demonstrators, in his capacity as head of the Supreme Police Council. But he did concede defeat.

*The situation was beyond imagination. The faces of the demonstrators showed how clear they were in challenging the regime and how much they hated it, how willing they were to resist with their bodies all attempts to divide them with truncheons and water cannons and all other tools. They outnumbered security forces by a million or more, a fact that shocked the Interior Ministry leaders and the president. Those government officials all sat at home watching the demonstrations on TV. Not one of them devised a political solution to what policemen were facing -- confrontations with angry people and indescribable hatred of the government. All of us were astonished.*

[35] (# 35 )

The prosecutor-general referred al-'Adli and his four lieutenants to Cairo criminal court, on charges of murder and endangerment of public property. [36] (# 36 )

### The People's Choice

When Husni Mubarak appeared shortly after midnight on January 29 to announce his appointment of a new government, it was the first time in his tenure that he had been summoned to the podium by popular fiat. But he was enacting a familiar script written by autocratic rulers past, offering concessions to a population that had beaten the police and gained control of a country's streets. An offering that if made only four days earlier would have been considered shrewd -- a cabinet reshuffle -- was now foolhardy. It simply sharpened the population's apprehension of imminent victory, spurring them to stay outdoors and demand nothing less than the ouster of the president. Since Mubarak had made it impossible to remove him from office through elections, Egyptians resorted to the streets to relay the people's choice.

The liberation of the streets from the occupation forces of the Mubarak regime was only the opening act. Next was the symbolic public acquisition of Parliament, filling the avenue outside with peaceful protesters and plastering the building's gates with the people's insignia. Then came the branding of public goods; "our money," read a scrawl of graffiti on an army tank. With remarkable focus, citizens targeted the structures of rule that had disenfranchised and dispossessed them for decades. The police stations and NDP headquarters were the first targets, but the nascent revolutionaries did not stop there, hitting municipal councils, governors' offices, state security buildings, police checkpoints, traffic departments, toll booths, utility buildings and other institutions that had taken their resources without giving in return. In Fayyoub, residents stormed the public utility company and destroyed the water bills that charged them exorbitant rates. In Ismailiyya, among the government institutions stormed was the Electricity Administration. In Alexandria, youthful demonstrators grabbed files from the main provincial building that they said showed evidence of corruption. In Isna, a town in Upper Egypt, 1,000 demonstrators stormed a brand-new administrative building that had yet to be formally opened, paid for with their monies.

The genius of the Egyptian revolution is its methodical restoration of the public weal. The uprising restored the meaning of politics, if by that term is understood the making of collective claims on government. It revalued the people, revealing them in all their complexity -- neither heroes nor saints, but citizens. It repaired the republican edifice of the state, Mubarak's hereditary succession project being the revolution's very first casualty. It compelled the police to bring back their old motto, erasing al-'Adli's sinister "police and people in service to the nation" and returning "the police at the service of the people." The countless public institutions branded with the names of Mubarak and his wife are now being rechristened in the names of regular people who died for the revolution. The referendum, a procedure disfigured beyond recognition by authoritarianism, on March 19 regained meaning as a matter for adjudication by the people. The revolution will have realized its emancipatory promise if it achieves one great task: constructing institutional checks against the rule of the many by the few.

At press time, Egypt's revolution is still in full swing. It must be expected, however, that the revolution will undergo phases of setback, real or apparent. The apparatus of coercion, indeed, has been quickly rehabilitated and is gingerly reinserting itself into civilian life. But on what terms? For Egypt's revolutionary situation to lead to a revolutionary outcome, existing structures of rule must be transformed. Citizens must be free to choose their presidents, governors, parliamentarians, faculty deans and village mayors, their trade union, student, and professional association leaders. They must have a binding say in the economic decisions that affect their lives. The coming years will reveal how much of that will happen and how. Just as it provided an archetype of durable authoritarian rule, perhaps Egypt is now making a model of revolution.

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### Endnotes

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[7] *Al-Ahali*, January 3, 2001.

[8] *Al-Ahram Weekly*, June 19-25, 2008.

[9] *Al-Misri al-Yawm*, March 18, 2011. [English]

[10] This interview is online at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UqZMz3enclE> (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UqZMz3enclE>).

[11] *Al-Shuruq*, January 22, 2011.

- [12] *Al-Misri al-Yawm*, January 23 and 24, 2011.
- [13] *Al-Shurouq*, January 12, 2011.
- [14] *Wall Street Journal*, February 2, 2011.
- [15] *Al-Misri al-Yawm*, March 12, 2011.
- [16] *Al-Misri al-Yawm*, January 25, 2011.
- [17] *Al-Shurouq*, January 25, 2011.
- [18] *Al-Shurouq*, November 29, 2010.
- [19] *Al-Shurouq*, February 18, 2011.
- [20] This scene was in fact captured on camera: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1HfkUJrSMoM> (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1HfkUJrSMoM>).
- [21] *Al-Misri al-Yawm*, January 27, 2011.
- [22] The scene can be viewed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kWr6MypZ-JU> (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kWr6MypZ-JU>).
- [23] 'Abd al-Rahman Yusuf, "Diaries of the Revolution of the Patient," *al-Misri al-Yawm*, March 7, 2011.
- [24] See footage from this battle at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pqh1iOXI6sO> (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pqh1iOXI6sO>).
- [25] *Al-Misri al-Yawm*, January 27, 2011.
- [26] These moments are recorded at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q58SI\\_4GN0E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q58SI_4GN0E) ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q58SI\\_4GN0E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q58SI_4GN0E)).
- [27] *Al-Misri al-Yawm*, March 12, 2011.
- [28] *Al-Shurouq* and *al-Misri al-Yawm*, January 27, 2011.
- [29] *Al-Misri al-Yawm*, January 28, 2011.
- [30] *Al-Misri al-Yawm*, January 30, 2011.
- [31] The transcripts of these communications were published in *al-Misri al-Yawm*, March 15, 2011.
- [32] The report was obtained by *al-Misri al-Yawm*, March 16, 2011.
- [33] *New York Times*, January 28, 2011.
- [34] *Al-Misri al-Yawm*, February 15, 2011.
- [35] *Al-Shurouq*, March 19, 2011.
- [36] *Al-Shurouq*, March 23, 2011.

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