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The Dynamics of Egypt's Protest: an Inside View*

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Summary :

The Egyptian protest movement eventually won a historic victory with the achievement of its main demand, the resignation of Hosni Mubarak from Egypt's presidency. But the seventeen tumultuous days from the start of the demonstrations on 25 January until the president's departure on 11 February were far from straightforward in their course. In this eyewitness report, a researcher who was present during the crucial days when Cairo's Tahrir Square became the centre of the revolt reveals how the social composition and the moods of the movement fluctuated throughout the protest. Nothing was predetermined; even the events that led to the occupation of the square itself had elements of contingency about them. The interplay between a minority of politicised participants and a much larger group of non-political young people from Cairo's neighbourhoods was at the heart of the shifts that took place, which were in turn influenced by the tactics of security forces and the character of official media coverage. These factors, critical to the evolution of the movement and the outcome of the protest, may continue to be important in shaping the aftermath of Egypt's revolt.

From 25 January to 11 February 2011, Egypt witnessed its biggest and in the end most effective protest movement since the time of the coup d'état in 1952. Throughout these eighteen days, millions of people gathered in the country's major cities to demand a regime

change and the departure of the president, Hosni Mubarak. As the protests developed, Cairo's Tahrir Square became their political and symbolic epicentre. The president's reluctant departure after thirty years in power has opened a new era in Egypt's history.

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Both the course of these epic events and the nature of the movement at their heart were, however, more complex than this summary allows. I had the opportunity to spend a week in Cairo among the protesters as they established momentum in the crucial early days of their demonstrations, from 27 January to 2 February, and my observations during this period give some insight into these complexities. There was, for example, an interplay between a minority of politicised participants and a much larger group of young people from Cairo's neighbourhoods with little political awareness, while the tactics of security forces and the character of official media coverage also influenced the course of events.

This report draws on my experience of the protests in and around Tahrir Square to highlight these and other important aspects of the movement, in the belief that they both help explain its evolution and will continue to be influential in shaping the afterlife of Egypt's revolt.

The security boomerang

I arrived in central Cairo on the night of Thursday 27 January, two days after the first protests had erupted. There was a deceptive calm on the almost empty streets. The various units of the anti-riot police (al-Amn al-Markazi) were getting some rest after three days of being on high alert, and nearly invisible. But on Friday morning the tension in the atmosphere notably increased, with Tahrir Square in central Cairo completely cordoned off. The police were also deployed in massive numbers around the main mosques in adjacent areas, denying access to many younger worshippers and/or protesters. Thus, many who wished to demonstrate chose to gather in mosques further away from the centre to avoid the police.

The Friday sermon was almost the same everywhere, with preachers calling on the

faithful not to join any demonstration and attempting to prove that such gatherings are against Islamic principles. As soon as the prayer was over, people started to gather in front of the mosques. No coordination among these different assemblies was possible, since the authorities had completely shut down mobile-phone communications and internet connections. The only way to access information about what was happening was to stop by the cafés to follow al-Jazeera's live broadcasting and news-feed; from these, people learned where other demonstrators were heading.

There is some evidence that these two security measures (cordonning off the city centre and shutting down all communications) proved counterproductive for the authorities. Without them, Cairo's anti-riot police might have faced a single huge demonstration in Tahrir Square; instead, the force had to handle dozens of small but simultaneous protests taking place in almost all the city's core neighbourhoods. This led to a fragmentation of police units and created much confusion among deployed units, as the central command was unable to manage and give orders to the scattered force.

The road to Tahrir Square

Most of the demonstrators at this early stage were young people with little political awareness. Their massive participation was perhaps the main factor that gave the movement the huge impetus it was to acquire. There were people present with more political knowledge – both with and without party affiliation – but they were a minority, and had no control whatever on the course of the demonstrations. This social balance was reflected in the slogans shouted, many of which were football chants adapted to fit the situation.

As the mobilisation proceeded, it was evident that it had no leadership at all. In this phase, the

main concern of the politicised demonstrators and those from organised forces was to contain attempts by people from Cairo's neighbourhoods to attack the police and official buildings. The demonstrators, picking up the signals and carried by their collective power, sought to move in the direction of Tahrir Square. Since major junctions and access-roads were still blocked by the police, they resorted to secondary streets and alleyways. This had a double effect: it enabled protesters to escape tear-gas bombs, and to be joined by huge numbers of residents of the smaller streets they passed through. As the growing crowds of marchers approached Tahrir Square they were met by intensified police repression, which they managed to push back enough to enter the square. The fragmented anti-riot police units gave up the fight when their stock of tear gas bombs and rubber bullets ran out.

This moment revealed something of the character of the anti-riot police, which is composed mainly of poor and ill-educated young people doing their military service and is far from a professional and efficient corps. In normal circumstances it can count on greater numbers and physical force, but on this occasion it found itself outnumbered by demonstrators. Its chief was later to tell the Egyptian press that he had received orders from above to use live bullets against the demonstrators, but had refused.

Later in the day, soldiers and army vehicles (including tanks) were deployed in central Cairo. The demonstrators warmly welcomed this move by chanting slogans expressing their high esteem for the Egyptian armed forces, reflecting the great popularity of the institution among Egyptians. Thus, on the evening of 28 January, did Tahrir Square become a "free zone."

The fluid protest

But violence was to continue over the next days, albeit in new forms. In the aftermath of the epic events of 28 January, the police and security forces vanished from Egypt's main cities. In the security vacuum following this suspicious withdrawal, widespread robberies and looting took place (some carried out by escaped prisoners, others by policemen). In addition, people who lived around the interior ministry, close to Tahrir Square, tried to burn down the building in retaliation for its guards' killing of three demonstrators. Some volunteer doctors on the square estimated that on 28- 29 January at least fourteen people had died in such violent clashes.

The authorities' apparent fomenting of violence had important effects. The army called on people to organize themselves to protect their neighbourhoods, leading many inhabitants to form "popular committees" to safeguard their areas. This development in turn had a crucial impact on the composition of the protest movement in Tahrir Square, in that the everyday, non-political (and mostly young) people who constituted so far the majority of the movement started to leave the demonstration to join the defence of their areas. Thus the movement in the square lost its grassroots component and became more dominated by the politicised demonstrators. In particular, the number of Muslim Brotherhood participants increased significantly. The organisation's young members were already highly involved in the protest, and its leadership feared a loss of legitimacy if it stayed on the sidelines; moreover, it calculated that in the event of the protest's failure the regime would take the opportunity to crack down severely on it. By Sunday 30 January, a turning-point was reached. The intense few days of protest had received broad support from the Egyptian public, but four factors caused this to begin to slide:

1. People were running out of money. The curfew imposed by the regime since the 28 January was hindering economic activity; most people had not received their pay for January, and it was impossible to draw cash as ATMs were not working;
2. The supplies of basic foods and other necessities were becoming ever scarcer, especially in areas close to Tahrir Square where the demonstrators went to shop;
3. Official propaganda used patriotic messages to incite many people against the movement. The closing of internet connections for five days (until 2 February) and restrictions on satellite channels left state television as the only source of information for millions of Egyptians;
4. The regime made some concessions to the people's demands, such as Hosni Mubarak's pledge to leave office at the end of his current term in September 2011 and his appointment of a vice-president. In addition, the president's speech on 1 February was judged patriotic and emotionally sincere by many Egyptians.

Tide reversing

These responses led many people who had initially been vaguely supportive (even if they had not participated themselves) to ask the demonstrators to go home. The protesters had difficulty explaining that the concessions were superficial in that they offered no major change to the foundations of the regime, and that in any case the movement could not stop halfway lest this give the regime the chance to inflict violent retaliation later.

The state's backlash continued on 2-3 February, when the official media (as well as some private satellite channels) circulated the notion that many protesters were pawns of foreign agendas and in the pay of foreign parties that

wanted to destabilise Egypt. This turned more people against the movement.

The widening social polarisation was illustrated on 2 February, when internet connections were restored. Several pro-“stability” and anti-protest groups had been created on Facebook, and many individuals who had been posting anti-Mubarak materials on their Facebook profile a week earlier were now severely critical of the protest movement.

The turning-point

But this crisis soon had another major reversal to come. On 2 February, allegedly pro-Mubarak thugs, some riding horses and camels, attacked protestors gathered in Tahrir Square with rocks, Molotov cocktails and knives. This aggression destroyed the impact of Mubarak's emotional speech the previous day and again turned many people against the regime. On 4 February, a week after the Tahrir Square occupation had started in earnest, the state media made a big U-turn in speaking positively about the protest movement and the demonstrators for the first time. These two developments contributed to a turnaround in public opinion, with many people then flocking to Tahrir Square to join the demonstrators.

The media shift can be attributed to three main factors. First, state media lost its monopoly over information broadcasting in Egypt starting from 2 February when the internet connection was restored. Egyptians could thus get information from different sources. (Only those with satellite channels had had access to alternative sources of information during the internet blackout.) Second, the fact that Egypt was back online also had another consequence: protestors managed to upload videos and pictures showing the violent repression of the first days of the mobilisation which state media had blacked out completely. Third, some reporters and journalists working for state media resigned and others started to organize

themselves to protest against the biased coverage of their media. As a result, state media could no longer continue its editorial policy without running the risk of implosion and losing the little credibility it had.

It appears that, at that stage, the military preferred to delay making a decision and taking sides for as long as it could. It's worth mentioning that the military establishment has been the backbone of the Egyptian regime since the 1952 coup and still plays the role of "king-maker", even if its political role became less explicit under Mubarak's reign. The military had to weigh its position carefully in order to safeguard its influence and popular image. It seems the army wanted to give Mubarak, who once belonged to the same establishment, every opportunity before asking him to step down.

At that stage, the balance of forces began to move in favour of the protest movement. But it was to take another week of demonstrations and

behind-the-scenes manoeuvrings for the crisis to reach a decisive point. On 11 February when protestors started flocking to the presidential palace, the army had to make its decision and it settled for the side of the 18-day-old protest movement. Mubarak finally stepped down – only hours after he had declared his intention to stay on until September 2011.

The explosion of joy in Tahrir Square at that moment signalled a victory for the protesters and a historic moment for Egypt, the region, and even the world. In a larger context, however, Friday 11 February 2011 also represents only "the end of the beginning". The fact that the course of events in and around Tahrir Square during these unforgettable days was so varied, and the composition and moods of the participants and the wider public so shifting, may yet aid understanding of what lies ahead for Egypt in the coming weeks and months.