

Egypt's Second January Uprising: Causes and Consequences of a Would-be Revolution

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During the first months of 2011, the Egyptian political system was shaken by a veritable political earthquake, as the almost 30-year rule of President Hosni Mubarak was brought to an end by a popular uprising. Despite uncertainties regarding the country's future – whether a fully democratic system will be implemented or whether the army will retain a “special” role within the polity – it is impossible to overstate the significance of the “Egyptian Revolution” and its impact on the Arab region and the Mediterranean neighbourhood as a whole.

Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation on 17 December 2010 sparked not only the Tunisian revolution, but a string of uprisings across the region, the best-known and thus far most successful of which was Egypt's “January Revolution.” There, independent labour and civil society organisations called for a demonstration on 25 January – opposed by the regime, ignored by traditional parties, and spurned by the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) – which turned out to be successful beyond anyone's most optimistic expectations. Much like in the Tunisian protests, and echoing the “First January Uprising” of 1977, ordinary Egyptians' anger was rooted in a combination of pauperisation and political repression that had become the hallmark of regional “façade democracies.” Although Egypt's revolution was a surprise to many, few careful observers missed the increasing frustra-

tion of ordinary people over the past decade or the increased civil society and trade union activism since 2006 that were the result of this marginalisation. On 25 January, and even more significantly on Friday the 28th, Egyptians' frustration and desire for change outweighed the fear the regime had ended up relying on, and a combination of popular pressure and regime factionalism resulted in Mubarak's ouster. The Egyptian revolution's potential regional impact should not be underestimated, as subsequent revolts in Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and latterly Syria show – not to mention significant protests in Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian Occupied Territories. Protesters in Tunisia and Egypt are now struggling to consolidate their gains. Others hope to emulate their success. While it is far from clear what enduring changes these uprisings herald, some important lessons on the roots and significance of Egypt's revolution can already be drawn.

Roots of the Uprising: Economic Stagnation and Police Repression

The causes of the uprising lay in a combination of three kinds of factors: ongoing trends towards the impoverishment of poorer sectors of society and the pauperisation of the middle class, the façade of democratic institutions masking a reality of increasing political repression since the 2005 “Cairo Spring,” and a series of trigger issues, primarily Mubarak's attempt at having his son Gamal “inherit” the Presidency (*tawreeth*), state security forces' torture and assassination of Khaled Said for wanting to expose corruption, (global) food price spikes, and, of course, the success of the Tunisian revolution itself. Long-term economic trends belied Western optimism – particularly the IMF's – in the health of Egypt's economy: while certain macroeconomic in-

dicators were very positive (e.g. showing a steady increase in GDP and decrease in the current account deficit), others – particularly increased youth unemployment, a population bulge, and middle class pauperisation – ought to have sounded alarm bells. While privatisation policies may have helped increase GDP, they clearly favoured narrow, politically connected business elites, the enrichment of whom caused considerable popular resentment. Certainly, they were of little benefit to the nearly 40% of Egyptians who live on or under \$2 per day, particularly since the (already abysmally low) minimum monthly wage of LE400 (\$68) was never enforced. The rise in food prices combined with pressure to cut subsidies on staples such as flour – which had already sparked “bread riots” – over 2010 further exasperated ordinary Egyptians.

Both workers and wider sectors of society were increasingly irritated by Mubarak’s blatant attempt to anoint his son Gamal as successor. Amongst the army as well, attempts at “succession” proved irksome

In parallel, certain sectors of Egyptian society saw a marked increase in political activism. In particular, technically illegal independent trade unions organised an increasing number of (increasingly effective) strikes from 2006 on. In 2010, there were more strikes than in the previous four years combined. These strikes not only boosted these unions’ popularity, but also provided valuable experience with organising and mobilising. Moreover, civil society groups, such as *Kifaya!* (Enough!), *Shayfeenkum* (We See You), the April 6th Youth Movement and a range of important human rights groups – the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, the Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights, etc. – increased in activism and popularity. Particular mention should be made of groups like the Centre for Trade Union and Worker Services, the Hisham Mubarak Law Centre and the Egyptian Organisation for Economic and Social Rights, which straddled civil society and labour.

Although some of these groups’ leaders were themselves sceptical about the degree to which such ac-

tivism could translate into a broader political movement, it was clear that both workers and wider sectors of society were increasingly irritated by Mubarak’s blatant attempt to anoint his son Gamal as successor. Amongst the army as well, attempts at “succession” proved irksome; personal loyalties did not extend to Mubarak’s son.

Another trigger issue was the increase in routine abuse of power by the security forces. Khaled Said’s case is exemplary: his assassination in Alexandria on 6 June provoked an outcry, not just for its sheer brutality, but because Said was not a political activist, but rather merely seeking to expose a case of police corruption of which he had evidence. Opposition groups organised mass protests in his native Alexandria, the largest of which was also attended by Muhammad El-Baradei on 25 June, but Said became a powerful symbol of regime corruption precisely because he was an “ordinary” citizen.

The “El-Baradei Effect” and the Parliamentary Elections

February saw considerable political ferment as former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency Muhammad El-Baradei decided to return to Egypt and effectively committed publicly to running against a Mubarak candidacy – *père* or *fils* – in the presidential elections expected for 2011. Initially embraced by many, and feared enough by the regime to smear him and his family, El-Baradei won few friends by being frequently away from Egypt. Indeed, he missed the beginning of the January uprising, only returning three days after protests began, on the eve of 28 January, or “Friday of Anger.” A side effect of this loss of credibility was that when he proposed what could have been a boycott of the parliamentary elections planned for the end of November and early December, he was first backed but then abandoned by every major political group, including the “reformists” within the Muslim Brotherhood. Such a boycott could have been very effective in depriving the regime of the fig leaf of democratic legitimacy that has been one of the primary functions of elections ever since Nasser and, particularly, ever since Mubarak came to power.

The elections themselves were widely expected to provide the regime with an excuse to crack down on

CHANGES IN THE ARAB WORLD: A BRIEF CHRONOLOGY

January - November 2010 – Background Events

The profound unease felt by large sectors of society in many Arab countries came to a climax, as demonstrated by many events, such as the multiple and growing protests shaking the region. In addition to the demands for political reform and greater freedom, there are other demands, such as improved living conditions, damaged by the rise in prices following the 2007-2008 food crisis and the fall in disposable income.

Governmental corruption and inefficiency in providing basic social services, unemployment, discrimination against minorities and inter-religious tension are affecting the stability of almost all the countries of North Africa and the Middle East.

December 2010 – Detonators

The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a young Tunisian fruit and vegetable peddler from Sidi Bouzid, and the results of parliamentary elections trigger revolts in Tunisia and Egypt.

The month of December in the Maghreb is thus marked by the spread of waves of protest against the high cost of living and unemployment, giving rise to clashes with security forces.

January 2011 – The Revolution Triumphs in Tunisia

The Jasmine Revolution attains its first goal: on 15 January, Ben Ali leaves the country under the pressure of the protest movement after 23 years of unshared power. Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi takes over the interim presidency and forms a “national unity government” marked by the entry of three opposition heads, but in which the outgoing administration retains the key posts. In the meantime, the Tunisian army acts as “guarantor of the revolution”.

In Egypt, the tension mounts rapidly and protests multiply in other Arab countries. Social networks are proving to be an effective social mobilization tool beyond government control.

February 2011 – The Revolution Triumphs in Egypt

The interim government launches the transition process in Tunisia and the activities of the former ruling party, the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD), are suspended.

In Algiers, the National Coordination for Change and Democracy (CNCD) calls for demonstrations to the slogans of “Algeria free and democratic,” “the power is a murderer” and “the people want the fall of the regime.” Some 2,000 people brave riot police. The state of emergency, imposed in 1993 to fight against Islamist guerrillas is lifted by presidential decree on 24 February after several sit-ins and strikes.

The president of Egypt for 30 years until now, Hosni Mubarak steps down on 11 February, after having roused the fury of protesters, and this despite having delegated his powers to the vice president several days earlier.

While social mobilization and calls to protest intensify in other countries (Morocco, Syria, Bahrain), popular revolt breaks out in Libya. The movement, with various social and political demands, leads to an armed conflict between rebels and loyalist forces affecting all major cities. The government uses militias, mercenaries

from Chad and Nigeria and its revolutionary committees to repress the demonstrators.

March 2011 – In Libya, Revolution Turns into Civil War

While the difficult transition processes advance in Tunisia and Egypt, Libyan troops loyal to Muammar al-Gaddafi manage to turn the situation around, taking the rebel strongholds one by one. On 17 March, the Security Council adopts UN Resolution 1973, giving the green light for the establishment of a no-fly zone over the country. In accordance with the UN authorization, military operations are undertaken in Libya by a coalition of countries led by France, the United Kingdom and the United States, with the participation of Spain as well.

Other countries repress social unrest (Syria, Algeria and Mauritania). In Morocco, King Mohammed VI sets up an Advisory Committee for the Revision of the Constitution in order to strengthen democracy following the 6 March events in front of the Parliament in Rabat, in which protesters demand “rule of law” and “radical” political and social reforms.

April 2011 – Syrian Protest Spreading

Former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and his two sons Alaa and Gamal are detained for 15 days on 13 April as part of an investigation into the use of violence against demonstrators during the January and February uprisings.

In Syria, the popular protest movement that began in mid-March extends to all major cities, despite violent repression by the armed forces under government orders. Security forces particularly entered the rebel city of Deraa, focal point of the protest, backed by tanks and armoured vehicles, and do not hesitate to open fire on residents and demonstrators, leading to the resignation of over 230 members of the ruling party. According to the NGO Human Rights Watch, the toll in deaths, injuries and arrests can not be verified at this time.

May 2011 – Libyan Civil War at a Stalemate

Spring is marked by loyalist forces being pushed back and the death of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi’s youngest son, Saif al-Arab Gaddafi, and three of his grandchildren in NATO air strikes against his operations. It is estimated that over 10,000 people have been killed since the beginning of events.

In Syria, the repression continues, especially in the centre of the country where the army sends tanks and machine guns, although President Bashar al-Assad declares a general amnesty on 31 May, including for members of the Muslim Brotherhood and all political prisoners.

June 2011 – Morocco Presents its Draft Constitutional Reform

As Libya continues to endure heavy fighting, Saif Al-Islam Gaddafi, one of Gaddafi’s sons, proposes holding free elections under international supervision within three months, indicating that his father would leave office in case of defeat.

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CHANGES IN THE ARAB WORLD: A BRIEF CHRONOLOGY (continuation)

On 17 June in Morocco, Mohammed VI announces the outcome of constitutional reform, which establishes increased powers for the prime minister and political parties. The draft reform will be submitted to a referendum on 1 July.

Bashar al-Assad, in turn, in a context of tension and violence between Syrian security forces and armed groups, calls for "national dialogue" while ruling out any reforms as long as "chaos" reigns.

On 21 June, ousted Tunisian President Ben Ali and his wife are sentenced in absentia to 35 years in prison and fines of 45 million euros for embezzlement.

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the MB. In the event, they resulted in a farcically large majority (93.1%) for Mubarak's ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). Brazen statements such as ex-Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif's claim that "it was a shock [to people] that the NDP won the majority of seats, while the Brotherhood won none, because it wasn't expected" fooled no one outside Egypt, and certainly no one within it. The result was even more grotesque than the sheer majority: during the second round, the NDP attempted to rig elections in favour of complacent – if not complicit – members of the opposition, producing surreal scenes in certain constituencies in which NDP candidates complained that the party had rigged elections in favour of their opponents. Thus, the elections revealed one of the regime's fundamental weaknesses: as a key tool to access patronage, the NDP proved attractive to the "official opposition," buying its pliability to authoritarianism, but precisely this feature eventually made it difficult to impose party discipline. This became clear in 2005 during the first attempt to marginalise the "old guard" opposed to Gamal and his "businessmen" allies, when sidelined NDP incumbents ran and won as independents, only to rejoin party ranks. In 2005, roughly half the NDP parliamentary party was elected as "independents." In the 2010 elections, the NDP often ran two candidates – sometimes up to four – in the same constituency, emphasising what was by then a three-way split between "Gamalites," the "old guard" and the undecided.

Most attention was on the 2011 presidential elections and the growing fear of *tawreeth*, but while they did not quite provide a breaking point, less than two weeks before the start of the Tunisian revolution, the elections' farcical result certainly reminded ordinary Egyptians of the regime's hypocrisy – to the extent that was even necessary.

Confessional Strife?

Another key factor in the maintenance of Mubarak's regime was Coptic-Muslim tensions. Surprisingly, protests were assertively anti-sectarian, despite marked increases in tensions throughout 2010, epitomised by the explosion of a bomb outside a Coptic church in Alexandria on 1 January, killing 24 and injuring 97. Sectarian tensions had been increasing steadily throughout the year, but just before the elections some Coptic activists started holding the regime responsible for their situation, rather than "Muslim extremists" as usual. The Alexandria bombing broke this new atmosphere and worsened the tensions considerably. The state did nothing to allay such fears when, for example, it took unwarranted action to "combat" avian flu by destroying all pigs, a crucial source of income for Coptic *zabaleen*, traditional garbage men. In the aftermath of the revolution, documents have been found that seem to corroborate what most observers already suspected: that the regime was exacerbating sectarian tensions, either directly through such actions or indirectly by allowing extremist Salafi groups to flourish as part of a conscious strategy to divide – and therefore more easily control – Egyptian society. Indeed, such manipulation was effective enough that at the outset of the revolution *all* religious elites – the Copts, the Azhar, and the MB – emphatically opposed the protests.

The Uprising

By early January there was a considerable amount of tension in Egypt, and an increased presence of security forces in the streets, but no clear sense that this would translate into an uprising – much less a

successful one. Indeed, there were several attempts to emulate Bouazizi's gesture, not least in Cairo, but none sparked the same outrage in what was widely perceived as a politically apathetic population. The 25 January demonstration was called by independent civil society and trade union groups, but shunned by established political elites, including the Muslim Brotherhood, underscoring the gulf separating them from ordinary Egyptians. Most observers, and the organisers themselves, hoped the protest would be significant, but did not expect much. Noted commentator Issandr El-Amrani, for example, tweeted "if you get a tenth of the 80,000 people or so who support the initiative online, it will be a success." In the event, more than ten times that number took to the streets across Egypt, with protests in Cairo and Alexandria, but also Ismailiya, Mahalla El-Kubra, Aswan, Suez, Port Said and many others.

The protest went through several phases and played out on different levels. First, surprised by the sheer scale of demonstrations, the security forces failed to confront protesters. This allowed demonstrators to control public spaces, particularly Cairo's Liberation (*Tahrir*) Square. By evening, the security forces had entered a second, confrontational phase. Attacking reduced numbers of protesters with water cannons, teargas, rubber bullets, taser bats and clubs, they re-took Tahrir Square in the early hours of 26 January. With newly unified opposition forces planning demonstrations for Friday the 28th, Internet and mobile phone services were cut and over a thousand people arrested. The most spectacular failure of this confrontational tactic, however, came on the 28th itself, when protesters across Egypt took back public spaces, simply overwhelming security personnel. Notably, protesters were extremely disciplined in avoiding initiating violent confrontations: the targets of protesters' anger were police stations and, in particular, the NDP headquarters, which was set ablaze. By evening, the security forces had withdrawn and the Army moved in and, having apparently refused orders to shoot protesters, were welcomed by crowds across the country.

The regime then adapted its tactics to mix repression with co-option, announcing reforms and threatening harsher crackdowns. On 29 January, Mubarak appointed Ahmed Shafiq Prime Minister, announcing the new government's remit to control inflation, increase employment and fight corruption. Two key appointments signalled struggles within the regime itself: General Intelligence Service Chief Omar Sule-

iman filled the post of Vice President, vacant since 1981, and Army Chief and Defence Minister Muhammad Tantawi was also appointed Deputy Prime Minister. Suleiman was reputedly closer to Egypt's (reviled) security forces, while Tantawi could use the armed forces' reputation amongst ordinary Egyptians as leverage – on demonstrators, but also on Mubarak and Suleiman.

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Direct confrontation having failed, security forces attempted to sow chaos – in particular by carrying out random attacks and freeing and sometimes enlisting prison inmates. On 2 February, protesters holding Tahrir Square were subjected first to a day-time assault by plain-clothes security forces and hired thugs in the so-called "Battle of the Camel," and then to an all-out night-time assault, with pro-regime thugs throwing rocks and Molotov cocktails at protesters both from outside the square and from on top of buildings, as well as using birdshot ammunition. Close to collapse, protesters were apparently saved by the intervention of "heavies" from the MB and football "ultras." The following days saw demonstrations grow even larger across Egypt in response.

The fate of the uprising was being played out on two parallel "tables": the streets and squares of Egypt, and the back-door negotiations between elements of the army and intelligence services, parts of the old regime, and a series of would-be "leaders" of the revolution, from the Brotherhood itself to a self-proclaimed group of "wise men" including business tycoon Naguib Sawiris and political scientist Amr Hamzawy. The result was three-way brinkmanship between the army, the regime and the opposition, in which the protesters' refusal to compromise and sheer will to face down regime repression was the *sine qua non* of change. Ultimately, the army seems to have "blinked" first, calculating that protesters

would not go away and that their pressure could be used to maintain the Army's privileges under a new "guided" regime.

The one measure taken with considerable speed – the push for elections – has been opposed by most independent groups, as it makes it easier for established groups close to the old regime to control Egypt's post-uprising parliament

Protesters themselves represented many different forces in Egyptian society, and it should be noted that while the relative strengths of and differences between organised groups such as unions, parties and Islamists are significant, most protesters were unaffiliated, even without any political experience. The bond holding them together was in a sense "negative," protesting the current state of affairs, with little agreement on what *kind* of change was necessary. It is, however, important to underscore the Brotherhood's absence: many of its young members took part in protests against the wishes of their leadership. Indeed, in the aftermath of the revolution, protesting the leadership's conservatism, its willingness to compromise with the (new) regime, and its own internal authoritarianism, these groups have repeatedly challenged the MB's "old guard," and some have split to form their own parties.

Post-Mubarak Transitions

The removal of the primary figures of the old regime is the first step of structural reform that protesters have called for. It is still too early to tell whether this is what the result of the revolution will be or whether elements of the former regime – NDP, security forces, military and complacent figures among "opposition" parties and religious elites – will manage simply to adapt the old regime's modus operandi and isolate key opposition groups.

Having effectively removed Mubarak and Suleiman, changed the government, and suspended parliament, the military, or the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), now rules in a state of ex-

ception, part executive, part legislative and – thanks to the widespread use of military courts – more than a little judiciary. It is also clear that, with the single exception of elections, which serve the military's interest in restoring a semblance of normality and "reform" in Egypt, measures of "real" reform have not come either swiftly or spontaneously from Egypt's interim leadership, but only in response to continued pressure, particularly from independent unions and civil society groups such as April 6th.

Parliament was suspended, media laws relaxed and elements of the former regime arrested and prosecuted, and the military eventually replaced PM Ahmad Shafiq with the more popular Essam Sharaf and Interior Minister Muhammad Wagdi with Mansour El-Essawy in early March, but only after considerable popular pressure. A Constitutional Panel was appointed to amend the Constitution in only ten days, rather than entirely replace it. Its decisions limited presidential terms but not powers and did not make a Constituent Assembly compulsory, but rather afforded the new parliament the "option" of electing one from its own ranks within 100 days. A referendum was called on the proposed amendments in which around 75% of voters – a massive 41% of the electorate compared to paltry turnouts during the Mubarak era – approved the amendments. Some have interpreted this as a "victory" for Islamists and remnants of the NDP, although most voted "yes" in a bid to secure some gains for the revolution and prevent the military from staying on.

The one measure taken with considerable speed – the push for elections – has been opposed by most independent groups, as it makes it easier for established groups close to the old regime – especially the NDP and MB – to control Egypt's post-uprising parliament. Finally, the much-hated emergency law, which suspends many civil and political rights, has still not been repealed. Such resistance by the military is slowly eroding its support amongst core protesters, just as the military attempts to erode protesters' popularity by accusing them of increasing "instability." Friday, 8 April, saw the first protests in which the military and Tantawi were directly accused of dragging their feet.

Beyond the Uprising

The only certainties seem to be that in post-uprising Egypt there is a flourishing of political activity – not only the formation of new parties, but also splits

within Islamist movements, particularly the MB – and that central to Egyptian politics is still a complex game between the military, the security forces, elements of the “old guard” (the NDP, but also the MB and other “decorative opposition” groups), and the independent civil society and labour groups that called for the uprising.

Egypt’s “Second January Uprising” provides a timely reminder that authoritarian systems can be frail as well as strong and that the economic and political causes of the uprising must be addressed with long-term structural reforms

The position of outside powers will also be crucial. Saudi Arabia supported Mubarak and was quick to try to secure a foothold in the “new” Egypt by offering investment. The US and the EU turned to support for reform during the uprisings, but have mostly seen “change” through the lens of the very (neo)liberal template that contributed to bringing about the revolution in the first place. Their response will depend at least partly on the positions taken by Egypt’s (potential) new leadership(s) on questions such as relations with Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Palestinian groups.

Egypt’s “Second January Uprising” provides a timely reminder that authoritarian systems can be frail as well as strong and that the economic and political causes of the uprising must be addressed with long-

term structural reforms. The risk of not doing so is not simply the failure of Egypt’s uprising, but also of missing an unexpected window of popularity for non-sectarian forms of democracy and ultimately discrediting the notion of democracy itself. The uprising has at least temporarily shown the potential limits of Islamist popularity: failing to take this opportunity risks playing into the hands of ultra-conservative and Salafist groups. Key to this opportunity will be meeting protesters’ demands not just for the formal trappings of democracy, but also for its social, economic and political substance.

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