

Children of the revolution

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A huge crowd marks the first anniversary of the revolution on January 25 in Tahrir Square. Photo: Laurence Underhill

Hopes were high following the uprising in Egypt that swept the dictator Hosni Mubarak from power, but the country's citizens are now discovering that the fight for its future is only beginning, writes David Lynch in Cairo.

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As Egypt faces into its first free elections in 60 years, the country's young revolutionaries continue to occupy the site of the revolution of January 25, 2011 - Tahrir Square in Cairo. On that day, the Egyptian ruler of 30 years, Muhammad Hosni El Sayed Mubarak, was toppled by a youth movement. However, more than 16 months later, the revolution is unfinished, leaving the country politically unstable and economically wounded.

The Egyptian revolution took place at a peculiar moment in history. The great financial crisis in the first world and long-standing anger towards US-led foreign policy in the Middle East have meant that many Egyptians do not see a satisfactory model for their new post-Mubarak republic in the West.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 long ago lost its early lustre, particularly following the crushing of the 2009 opposition protests. Some people here mention the "Turkish model" as a way to follow, but the revolutionary youth want the military leadership to be completely under civilian rule - but it isn't clear if that's the case in Turkey.

The socialist left is internationally weak and its impact in Egypt is not strong (although it is growing) and kingdoms such as Saudi Arabia are not attractive models to a people seeking freedom and justice.

Left without a blueprint, the Egyptians have been trying to muddle through. Revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces clash on the streets and on television news, in the workplaces and in the thousands of cafes across Egypt.

If some believe the counter-revolution is led by the security forces and remnants of the old regime still loyal to Mubarak, it is the radical *shabab* (youth) who are the cutting edge of the revolutionary movement.

Libelled and slandered by the remnants of the old regime and state media, these young people also produce uncomfortable feelings in the hearts of many older Egyptians.

But everything that has been won in Egypt - the end of the Mubarak dictatorship, the creation of independent trade unions, freedom of speech, expansion of free media and the holding of parliamentary and presidential elections - has been won on the street by the revolutionary movement.

Divided and mistaken they may have been at times, but the revolutionary shabab have fought bravely and shed much blood since January 2011.

They remain the inspirational vanguard of the Egyptian revolution, steadfast in opposition to the remnants of tyranny, the most uncorrupted carriers of the hopes summed up in the revolution's original slogan of 'Bread, Freedom and Social Justice'.

While they may be momentarily in retreat and feeling marginalised from political developments, it is from within the ranks of the revolutionary shabab that the people who will eventually shape the future of Egypt must surely come.

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Hossam el-Hamalawy grew up in Nasr City, a suburb built in the 1960s for military families, where east Cairo meets the desert. It soon soaked up Cairo's middle class, such as el-Hamalawy's academic parents. He recalls his childhood, seeing soldiers and military vehicles manoeuvring across the sand.

Three decades on, Nasr City has been swamped by Cairo's breathtaking expansion. The desert cannot be seen, but the military still have a strong presence.

El-Hamalawy, 34, has no loyalty to the institution. "The military has been the backbone of this dictatorship, and just like we have to purge the police, we will have to purge the military for sure."

The activist was not new to political protest when the revolution sparked in Egypt exploded last year. He had been arrested and tortured by the previous regime. A trade union organiser and a member of the Revolutionary Socialists of Egypt, he combines his attacks on the remnants of the old regime with an optimism born from a historical perspective.

"If you speak to some of the revolutionary shabab, they will say the revolution has been lost, or hijacked, or whatever. I have heard the phrase 'The revolution got hijacked' a hundred times.

"Well, guess what - the revolution continues. And what is your barometer for success? Is it to do with how many people you can get in Tahrir? Or is it more to do with how far the social movement has spread? How many strikes there are? How many corrupt figures are being purged from the workplaces and elsewhere? How many independent unions are being established?"

"This is a battle; it was not settled in 18 days. It will not be settled in 18 months either. It will take several years. Not because I love chaos or I like the instability we are in now. It is just a fact of history."

Of the January 2011 revolution, El-Hamalawy says: "I was almost crying all the time, of course. I could not believe my eyes. For years, we had been trying to mobilise. In the 1990s, we were an isolated group of radicals, treated like aliens from outer space by people. Whenever we used to shout against Mubarak then, people used to run for their lives. It was not just the police attacking you, it would be people telling you to 'shut up, you are going to get us into trouble'.

"So after all that, to reach the day when millions are willing to repeat your chants and endorse your demands . . . there is nothing like it, nothing like it for sure. It was beautiful, they were beautiful days."

However, El-Hamalawy believes the continued occupation of Tahrir Square may not be the best tactic for the youth opposition movement.

"I understand for some youth that Tahrir is their only channel to become politically active. For someone like me it's different. My end goal is different, and the route to it does not necessarily pass through Tahrir. I do support protests in Tahrir, but in the end I do not think that will bring down the military power."

El-Hamalawy is concentrating his efforts on the newly-independent labour movement.

An extraordinary wave of industrial unrest that hit Egypt in the final years of the Mubarak regime, and the importance of strike action in the final days of the January revolution is acknowledged by most observers as crucial to Mubarak's final defeat.

Since the revolution this industrial unrest has increased. This constant strike action is damned by the country's military leadership, and by state media, for promoting "instability". El-Hamalawy sees it differently.

Interestingly he says most of the workers he deals with are religious Salafists (a conservative Islamist movement of which many secular Egyptians are distrustful), but he's not overly concerned.

"The secular middle classes are freaking out for sure at the Islamists. For me the struggle and polarisation should not be secular versus religious. But the Islamists and liberal forces here are channelling the conflict in a polarised fashion.

"I know that many Copts [Christians] are thinking about leaving the country. I know secular Muslims, middle-class friends of mine, who are saying things like 'Look at the beards, at the niqabs, they are taking over'. It's the kind of discussion that you might expect in somewhere like France, not here. But I am not that worried.

"As a secular leftist, I don't want any sort of theocracy, but you don't fight theocracy by just explaining secular and liberal ideas to people.

"The overwhelming majority of workers I deal with are religious. Very, very religious, in fact. They know I'm a communist. But when it comes to strike time, they deal with me, they do not deal with the Muslim Brotherhood. They know who is going to be with them at the front line. Is it the local Muslim Brotherhood MP who turns up with the police asking them to stop the strike? Or is the radical socialist who is trying to coordinate, get media attention and help them out?"

"During those strikes, those religious workers behave in a way that is against their general framework of religious ethics. For one thing, strikes are *haraam* [sinful]."

"This is the kind of action that is needed - pulling the people towards the social justice agenda will secularise those people. That is how you split them as well, split the working poor from the filthy-rich sheikhs who drive around in Mercedes."

He sees little hope in the upcoming elections, and believes that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) will remain as the real power, no matter what candidate is victorious.

"This has a long way to go yet. We still have time."

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For Maher Hamoud, 34, the revolution was televised, but that was not the way he wanted to experience it.

The democracy and governance researcher was a stern critic of the old regime. However, in December 2010, he moved to London for study and work, just weeks before the revolution.

"It was terrible timing," he says. "I always felt there was a revolution coming. But I expected it [to be] when Mubarak dies. I thought people would be in the street then. I did not expect it before."

Despite being thousands of miles away from the epicentre of the revolution in Tahrir Square, Maher participated in demonstrations outside the Egyptian embassy in Britain.

"I had so many painful, stressful feelings. I was unable to sleep. I was watching television, opening different channels on the computer, reading blogs, twitter. It was crazy," he says.

"When I felt really crazy, I would have to smoke and, unlike Cairo, you cannot smoke indoors in Britain. So I would go outside to smoke in the freezing cold and then run back in. I might have just missed five minutes, but every five minutes carried something new."

"During the Battle of the Camels [when protesters were attacked by Mubarak loyalists on horses and camels], I cried a lot. I could not believe that this was how they were ending the revolution. The army was just standing by while these thugs attacked people in the square."

"It was frustrating. In the middle I just wanted to come back. I had the ticket, but I was told by my friends there was a real possibility of me being arrested at the airport."

Having missed the heady days of the January revolution, Maher returned home to a very different country in March 2011.

"I could feel a difference instantly. At the airport it felt different. The security was very light and extremely polite. And then one of the guards said to me: 'You enlighten the country by your return'. No police officer had ever said something like that to me," says Maher, laughing.

"Friends picked me up from the airport; they were really sad for me that I had been away during the revolution. So they brought me on a tour of the city. The first thing that struck me was the amount of graffiti. Then seeing the burned headquarters of Mubarak's National Democratic Party building was amazing.

"It was beautiful to see that building black. It took away my breath, to see this huge evil building burned black. I felt proud and shed tears of regret that I was not in the square."

Since then, Maher has been in Tahrir many times, and was on Mohammed Mahmoud Street in downtown Cairo last November when there were fierce clashes between revolutionaries and security forces.

"For a few days during those clashes, people were really helping each other. I saw a veiled girl, who looked really upper-class, and she was smashing a part of the sidewalk with a big metal thing. And then taking up big stones and giving it to people and then running and throwing them, and nobody said a word to her.

"You saw veiled and unveiled people there, bearded and unbearded, people I know who are Islamists and people I know to be hardcore atheists. They were all together."

The involvement of women in the revolution has been much-celebrated by revolutionaries. Participation by young Egyptian women in the major mobilisations in Tahrir has been important - although their political representation in the parliament is dismally low.

The revolutionary shabab lack any significant representation in the parliament, or in the upcoming presidential election.

This leads some gloomily to conclude that they did the fighting and the dying while others, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, have won the resulting political prizes.

"In terms of power-gaining, it is true," says Maher. "But there is another dimension people do not emphasise - that is breaking the fear barrier.

"This is something that people will not see until it is represented in the future. At the moment you can see it in high school student unions, in university student unions, labour unions, the football ultras. These people have gained something, and they are unstoppable.

"But, politically speaking, the only entities that took power were those who were ready to take it. And the youth were not ready to take it. But they will take it I think. But they are not yet politically organised, they are still on the streets."

Maher agrees this revolution is one where "the revolutionaries have not come to power", but says they should be given time. "I'm optimistic and happy and proud of what we have gained, and I am sure we are going somewhere that will meet our dreams - in the medium and long term.

"Many of the older generation were brought up to be scared. And they are still scared. But I am not. If you get into a debate with the older generation about it, they will say you are part of an impolite and disrespectful generation and you are out of control.

"But the young have changed. And soon they will be gaining more power. Just wait until they graduate - they will be involved in work and politics. What do you expect from them? That they will be cowards like their parents? I don't think so."

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'At that moment it was the only thing I had ever accomplished. At that exact moment I said nothing is now impossible. I will do what I want.'

On January 25 last year, Ahmed Moukhtar Elazhary, 23, was standing in Tahrir Square alongside millions of his compatriots when word spread that the dictator Hosni Mubarak had been toppled.

"I spent almost 18 days on Tahrir Square during the revolution. Every day, I was weak like any normal person. I did not believe that Mubarak would go. I was just trying but not believing, because I had never done anything like this before," he says.

"But after, I changed all my perspective and my impressions about everything. I had not seen anything small get bigger like that. I grew up under this regime, and it was difficult to believe it was gone. It was sort of like a miracle. I think all the youth across Egypt feel the same way."

As Mubarak was forced from office, Elazhary committed himself to changing his own life too. "I decided to quit my full-time job and start my own company," he says.

Today, Mubarak is in jail and facing an imminent verdict in his trial; however, his army generals in the SCAF remain in power. The revolutionary movement has been further marginalised by a parliamentary election which has given Islamist forces a majority in government.

The young revolutionaries who took to Tahrir in January 2011 continue to clash with security forces on a regular basis. Many of these shabab have lost their lives on the streets of Cairo fighting against SCAF rule.

With the historic opening round of the first post-Mubarak presidential elections taking place this week on May 23 and 24, the revolutionaries are split as to the best outcome from the voting.

Some believe the election is nothing more than a military-coordinated sham, while others see tentative cause for optimism in the candidature of the "liberal Islamist", Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh.

Living through a revolution has caused millions of young Egyptians to assess the nature and meaning of their lives as citizens.

For Elazhary, it has meant taking a step into the unknown.

"Before the revolution, everything was stable - but maybe that was because you never tried anything difficult. Then, everything seemed so difficult. Politics, difficult; studying, difficult; setting up a business, difficult. But now I feel I can accomplish anything.

"Now it's more a feeling that we should try new things. I felt like I should try and launch my business."

The enthusiastic entrepreneur smiles broadly. Since the revolution he has established Culturegate, an educational establishment which he says offers a new style of language education.

He says he hopes to augment the poor state education system, which was a chronic failure of the previous regime.

"After you leave school, you are not able to speak or write English well, although you learn it for many years. But the problem is not just English - I'm talking about everything, physics, maths, all subjects. At any government school you pay nothing, but you get nothing from it," he says.

Whether as a result of an underpaid and undermotivated teaching sector, or because the dictatorship actively discouraged the creation of an educated and critical thinking youth, the public education system is regarded as a disaster zone by many Egyptians.

While studying Business Administration at Cairo University, Elazhary realised he had to improve his English. An encounter with an tutor from England showed him how language could be taught in a more successful manner.

"He was an engaging teacher, and I started to speak and learn faster. I asked my friends to join, and they found it worked as well. Then I thought, why not make this for everyone? I started to rent out a few rooms to make courses and I made some money. I was also doing something good for people around me."

After university, Elazhary was involved in freelance language course work and working full time in the marketing department of a company. He contemplated launching his own business, but financial and social constraints were prohibitive. "To get job security is important to people in Egypt," he says.

Launched a few weeks after the revolution, Culturegate now has two branches in Cairo and has developed beyond being solely a language school. It focuses on building critical thinking and a sense of understanding of different points of view among its students.

Elazhary has brought a strong flavour of "the spirit of Tahrir" into his workplace. "I know it sounds like just talk, but I would like to help my community, leave my legacy and do something for the benefit of people," he says. "We lost about 60 years to nothing under the old regime. At this point, we need to look forward, improve and develop in economics, science, culture . . . everything."

Elazhary sees the continued violence on the streets and fears over whether the military will step down after the presidential election as an inevitable part in the birth of a new society.

"After 60 years of a military regime, it's normal to have problems. People don't know what they want, but they know what they don't want. They say: 'Oh, I don't want to be like the Salafists', or 'I don't want Mohamed ElBaradei' . But if you asked people what they want, they don't know. The elite are also confused. So it seems everyone is against each other.

"We are still young, but soon we will find our long-term plan. We used to say in Egypt: 'If you have a dream, be careful - because maybe your dream will come true'. So maybe we were not careful enough, because it came true, and now we are asked what we want, we are confused."

When Elazhary thinks about the future of his company, Culturegate, he thinks not so much in commercial expansion, as sinking deeper roots in communities. He wants to set tents in sporting clubs to hold exhibitions and get people interested in language and culture. He also wants to take young people from the poorest neighbourhoods and bring them through development courses so they can go home and improve their community.

"Yes, there is instability, and it is hard to predict things now, but in some ways I do not care," he says.

"At least now, I don't know what is going to happen in the next few years. Maybe it will be good, maybe it will be bad, but it is okay with me not to know.

"Under the Mubarak regime, you could not imagine or dream, because the future was already decided. It was already known. When you don't know the future, you can dream. We can all imagine things different."

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