18 DAYS

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18 days

On 11 February 2011 President Hosni Mubarak, who had ruled Egypt for 30 years, stepped down from power. It was a moment of intense euphoria and immense upheaval in the region.

Here, eight Egyptians tell their story of the 18 days of protest and 10 years of tyranny that followed his downfall through exclusive interviews

18 days was shortlisted for the Amnesty International Media Awards, 2022.

MUBARAK'S EGYPT

"Mubarak's regime was like a dark cloud that covered everything my generation could aspire to be." Mosa'ab Eshamy, photojournalist.

Ghada Najibe gathers her high school friends into a circle, sits them down and smooths out the flare of her skirt. "Have you heard of Zaki Badr?" she asks the women huddled around, staring at her intently.

By day, Ghada is secretary of the student union, a leader in the class of 1987. At night she watches her mother read articles published in *Wafd* newspaper,

the signature green oblong at the top right-hand corner, the red headlines glaring out from the page.

When she finishes, Ghada studies the crisp print herself, inhaling the twists and turns of the Mubarak regime and his men.

“Zaki Badr, our interior minister, tortures people” she tells her friends. She pauses, awaiting their reaction, then raises her voice. “Are we going to be silent about his crimes?’

“No,” they reply. “No, we’re not.”

The five women around Ghada buy paint brushes and use them to daub slogans on the walls decrying police brutality. They print flyers which they distribute at the local Pepsi factory. The group grows, until there are 60 of them with a simple goal: to spread the word about fighting for human rights and justice.

But the momentum is short-lived and Ghada is called to the head teacher’s room. She pushes the door slowly, enters and as the space opens up, she sees six men in the office.

“What’s your relation with politics?” one of them asks her. From their stiff grey suits, she gathers they belong to the intelligence services. “Who helped you?”

“You are a student,” another chips in. “You have a task, politicians have their tasks.”

Eventually the men leave and her teacher spins around and squares up to her.

“Do you realise the situation you put me in now?” She walks to the desk and slams her bag on top of it. “You were about to get all your teachers, coleagues and family disappeared. How dare you do that to us?”

Ghada is suspended for three days and stripped of her student union’s post. But

the burning desire for change has not been extinguished – it lives within her from that day onwards.

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Haitham Ghoniem grew up in a family that was sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. At home neither the occupation of Iraq nor Gaza was acceptable. “The anger was already there,” he says.

Roughly one year before the revolution Haitham organised a group to make change, the driving force behind it supporting the poor in Egypt. They worked together to produce a magazine called Mustaqbalna, Our Future, but stopped after just two issues had gone to print.

Haitham had relatives in state security and a message warning him off politics was delivered. But he had been mesmerised by a video featuring the famous Egyptian actor Adel Imam, who was recorded asking people why they didn’t like Hosni Mubarak. Every time someone gave a reason, Haitham would jot it down.

What stuck in his mind was the MS Al-Salam Boccaccio ferry accident, when a boat carrying mainly Egyptian labourers sank. The owner of the company operating the ferry, a member of Egypt’s ruling party, fled to Europe and escaped justice.

The story encapsulated what the revolution would later challenge: that Egypt’s political elite live above the law.

Haitham left Cairo on a training course for two weeks. When he returned, state security knocked on the door and arrested him.

“Why are you against the election of Hosni Mubarak?” he remembers them asking in the interrogation. “Why are you against his son Gamal Mubarak succeeding him? What are your affiliations? What political party do you belong

to or support? Are you part of Kefaya?"

"No" he replied.

"6 April?"

"I'm just a normal person, I don't belong to a political party."

"Officially you're at home but in reality, you're in state custody," one of the officers told him just before he was released. "If I want to make you disappear there's no one in the world that can do anything."

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Rewind to 2008 and a group of activists across Cairo were preparing for a protest outside a textile factory in Mahalla.

On 6 April, in an industrial city cloaked in pollution in the middle of the Nile Delta, tens of thousands of people answered their calls and gathered in support of workers who wanted higher wages and the government-backed union to be sacked.

The group would later become the 6 April movement, one of the most prominent opposition groups in the country.

Among the protesters was Ghada, the former student from 1987. By now she is married and has two sons, Mohammed, 8, and Yousef, 9.

Omar Magdy, a student dentist, skipped classes to stand in solidarity with the workers.

"Mahalla was considered a dress rehearsal for the January revolution," explains Khalid Esmail, who is now a member of the 6 April's political bureau.

It wasn't the only protest 6 April organised. They held demonstrations in support of Palestine and encouraged people to gather on the stairs of the Journalists'

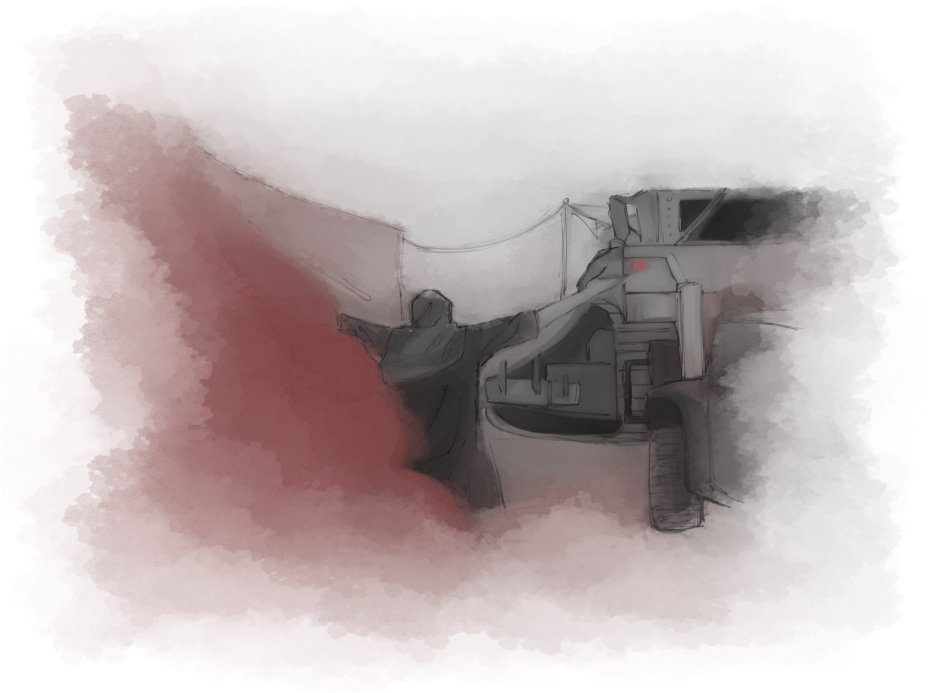
Syndicate – Nasserists, liberals, leftists, anyone – to demand judicial independence and an end to torture and police brutality.

Like a snowball the corruption and brutality of the state were picking up opponents across the country – as individuals and collective movements – and their anger and sense of injustice were hurtling towards 2011.

"Honestly, no one really expected things to happen the way they did, in all Arab Spring revolutions," Khalid Esmail says. "There were indications that the Mubarak regime could not be changed, as attempts to reform the regime from within completely failed. What actually encouraged the revolutionary movements was the realisation that the regime could not be changed from within."

"The straw that broke the camel's back was in 2010 when it was very clear that the elections were blatantly rigged, and several judicial rulings were issued saying the elections were," Khalid continues. "The regime was forcibly and flagrantly insisting to keep the results and not change them. And that was the beginning of an alliance among political parties in Egypt that realised the regime would not change and agreed that it needed to be changed. And that there should be revolutionary action, which actually started in 2008 with the Ghazl El Mahalla worker protests which was like a prova for what's coming next, and it encouraged people to speak up in the streets, then people set themselves on fire at the House of Representatives, then Khaled Said and the bombing of the Saints Church in Alexandria and the murder of Sayed Bilal."

In 2010 Mosa'ab Elshamy was studying in pharmacy school outside Cairo. His father had been imprisoned under Anwar Sadat and he himself had been Inspired by the Mahalla strikes. Every day he would board the bus that took him to college and as it negotiated its way through Cairo's traffic-choked streets, he would scroll through his phone to check the news.



That's where he saw the pictures of Khaled Saeed, the computer programming graduate who was beaten to death by police officers in the northern city of Alexandria in the summer of 2010. The young men who studied his corpse as it did the rounds on social media saw themselves in Khaled and realised just how easily that could have been them.

When a year or so later a vegetable vendor from Tunisia, fed up with corruption, set fire to himself outside a provincial government building in Sidi Bouzid the two events collided and lit up Egypt's opposition movement.

Ali Ahmed, a young man from Kerdasa, a village outside Cairo, sat with his family and friends watching footage of Mohammed's self-immolation on TV and the demonstrations it sparked across the country.

"Are people going to take to the streets here?" they asked one another. "Should

we go?"

They deliberated on the effect of his actions and the implications for them at home in Egypt.

"We have nothing to lose," they decided.

As momentum around Tunisia's Jasmine revolution grew at home, Khalid and his fellow 6 April members set about preparing workshops to train people on how to take to the streets and protest peacefully.

Someone cut a water bottle in half and wrapped it around his arm. "This is to shield you in case a policeman hits you with a baton," he explained.

Human rights organisations set up hotlines to give people legal advice and sketched out text message templates that could be sent in case people were arrested.

"Don't carry a smartphone," one of the organisers warned. "You'll be too easy to track."

On the evening of 24 January 2011, Ghada, Haitham, Khalid, Mosa'ab and Omar followed their social media pages closely. Videos were circulating, encouraging Egyptians to go out and protest: "Regardless of what it achieves," the commentators promised. "Tomorrow is going to be a new day in Egypt."

18 DAYS

"Hold your head up high, you're an Egyptian." Ali Ahmed, activist

On the morning of 25 January 2011 Ghada Najibe woke up, wrapped a pink head scarf around her hair, and pulled on her high heels. She planned to go and stand outside the Mustafa Mahmoud Mosque in the suburb of Giza to protest along with her three children. Ghada herself was now 38. Mohammed was 13, Yousef was 12. She had a daughter, Rihan, who was five. She wasn't expecting much.

When Ghada arrived, she was surprised to find protesters hacking away at the security cordon which had been erected to hem them in. She weaved herself into the crowd and started running, taking in huge gulps of air. Something smelt different that day, there was a lightness in Ghada's movements and she momentarily lost control as she negotiated the alleyways, waving a flag in time to the chants.

"Hey mother Egypt, watch; these are your children," the crowd shouted. "They worry and care for you, they sacrifice their soul and blood for you."

Then suddenly she stopped. Where were her children? She turned to face the direction from which she had come and saw a boy carrying a young girl on his shoulders. She recognised her green jacket, the red band holding back her hair with the pink bow visible to the side.

"At that moment I felt that the smell of the air was different, that I was breating something different. It was the first time I shouted like that. Once the barrier of fear was broken and we ran, it was like a tall mountain on our hearts and

chests had been removed. Freedom. It was the first time I really felt free to the point that I literally forgot my children," says Ghada.

Not far away from where Ghada and her family were enveloped in the crowd, Sara Mohani was at home in Dokki, preparing to attend the demonstration with her father. She had spent the last few hours trying to win her mother over, who didn't want her to go.

That morning, Sara sat an exam which was initially scheduled for 27 January, but the board had moved it to the 25th to try and deter students from attending the protests. She said goodbye to her mother and left with her father.

Amongst the millions of people, Sara's father held up a board, with Irhal,

“leave,” painted across it. She captured the photo on that momentous day, the swaying crowd forming the backdrop.

Sara turned as a young man approached her. “Excuse me, could you please come and help us at the gate?” he asked.

“The gate?” Sara thought about the makeshift controls she and her father had passed through to get inside the square.

“We don’t have women at the gates to search the other women as they come in,” he explained.

Sara nodded and followed him.

“During the revolution, I felt very safe as a woman,” Sara recalls. “I felt that Tahrir Square was the safest place despite the large number of people. I didn't see any harassment incidents against women during this period. At all. And I never heard of any.”

“For me, I felt that I was walking beside my relatives and family, I was walking safely. I mean, for example my dad wasn't worried that someone would harm me, no, he felt that all the people around me were from my family. No one approached me, and even the young men who were there were always worried and protective of the women, so they would try to keep a distance between us. These things made me feel safe.”

Roughly 14 kilometres to the west of Cairo, business studies student Ali Ahmed and his friends went down onto the streets of his village Kerdasa and headed for the police station. Ten of them entered a street and they grew into 100. When there were 100 of them they became 1,000. They passed all the homes until virtually the entire village was with them.

Once they arrived at the police station, they formed a sizable crowd outside.

Everyone had heard the stories about police brutality, about the torture and the forcible disappearances from the street. The response was deadly. That day, police killed two young men from Kerdasa and another from Bani Magdoul, a nearby village.

Their deaths galvanised the crowds and the state of anger grew. That evening all the police officers withdrew from the stations.

The protesters set off in a convoy of cars and taxis, winding their way through the villages on the road ahead to Cairo. They reached the entrance to Bein Al-Sarayat, close to Cairo University, where the road was blocked with protesters and police. They got out and started to walk.

Ali looked up at the people watching from their balconies. “You’ve ruined the country,” some of them shouted down. Others egged on the protesters, encouraging them and wishing them success.

“While I was at university, I mixed with other people but the idea of coexisting with other people, now I really understood it, I matured. I felt like I grew intellectually,” says Ali.

“It really got me to the point where I saw everyone as the same and everyone agreed on the same idea. It was such a nice spirit, it was all Christians and Muslims, there was no difference between us, no discriminating or distinguishing, there was no difference, even with secular or liberals, no one was discriminating.”

“In the days of the revolution, you could see how there was an acceptance and welcoming to all ideas, it seemed like a small version of Egypt,” recalls Mosa’ab, “one that was much more tolerant, one was much more accepting, one where people tried to make themselves useful, where people looked out for each other. Where there was a flow of ideas and characters and diversity and

religions. There was a huge sense of optimism, people could go to the square and just feel like they were in a free Egypt."

Osama Gaweesh, a dentist who had his own clinic in Damietta, a port city on the Mediterranean coast, was demonstrating in his hometown.

"We needed to demonstrate in different provinces in different governorates, not only in Cairo, not only in Tahrir Square," he recalls. "This had a great impact on the regime. It was not just thousands of people in one city. No, the whole country was demonstrating. We had some contacts with the people who were

demonstrating in Cairo, and they advised us to keep demonstrating in our governorate." Three days later they asked them to go to Tahrir Square: "We had to be there in our millions, we had to be a large number crowded in Tahrir Square."

Once anyone arrived on Tahrir Square they were welcomed into the fold. It was like the euphoria, love and compassion rocking the square was thrown up around them, protecting them from the brutality of Mubarak's regime, shielding them from the brutal years that had preceded 2011. They could be anyone and do anything they wanted. Everything was perfect.

Until it wasn't.

On 28 January, black smoke billowed out across Tahrir. Looking directly down on the square, it's not that easy to make out the corners of the fading architecture and there are just glimpses of the red, white and black flags held up by protesters. The regime was starting to panic and the crackdown was getting uglier.

At 10.20 am Haitham Ghoniem set off for the Rabia Al-Adawiya Mosque where he had arranged to meet a group of friends. He slipped his phone out of his pocket to text one of them and realised he had no phone signal. Mubarak had shut down the mobile phone networks and the internet in an attempt to break up the protests.

Haitham turned around, headed home, took off his shirt and wrote his name and home phone number on his stomach. If he died that day, at least the person who found him could identify him. He pulled his shirt back over his head and pulled the door behind him. He paused momentarily and thumped the ground with one hand – to see whether what was happening was real or not.

When he made it to the mosque he and a friend entered. At the minaret a

sheikh was delivering an angry sermon in favour of Mubarak. One of the young men praying stood and confronted the sheikh: "It's because of people like you that tyranny and injustice spreads and that criminal activity has increased," he shouted. His voice boomed across the walls. Inspired, the worshippers joined the young man and began chanting against the regime. When they eventually left, state security had placed a cordon around the entrance and had thrown in tear gas to try and hold them back.

The crowd moved towards Ghamra, some five kilometres from Tahrir Square. People lowered baskets of water from their balconies and offered their landline telephones with long cords, encouraging them to call friends and family to tell them they were okay.

"That was how the people in poorer neighbourhoods encouraged us," Haitham recalls. "Unfortunately, now, people just insult them. But they were part of the revolution and we respect them."

The crowd moved across the Ghamra Bridge and towards the Coptic Hospital. A march from the Suez Bridge had just arrived at the same time.

"We passed the Ghamra Bridge and went close to the Coptic Hospital. There was a march or a protest that got there before us, I think they came from the Suez Bridge. I saw state security were already cracking down on them, firing into the crowd and throwing tear gas at people and so we joined the protests," recalls Haitham.

"Then the beltagayya joined in with sticks. An old guy stood in front of them, he had two of his daughters with him. He asked, why are you guys here? What are you doing? Why are you attacking us? The thugs said, you came into our neighbourhood and because of you, we are suffering from the tear gas and the police are going crazy on us. Why don't you leave? The man said I am here for

you. I'm well off, I don't need to protest. The way this man was talking to them surprised the group of thugs."

"The guy was saying to him, I'm here for you, you should be living a dignified life," Haitham continues. "So, the conclusion of this was that the group of thugs put down their weapons and sticks and everything they had and decided to join the protesters. The thugs said to them, the most important thing is, don't hurt the soldiers, because they are from our people."

"So, this group of thugs were really smart, they got a big piece of wood, they all stood behind each other, and said they were going to keep running behind the wood until they hit state security, we're going to try and capture one of them and bring them back. If one of us falls, try to cover us. Two of them grabbed two soldiers and came back. The people who covered them from behind and protected them were getting shot at. They took the two soldiers into a closed off place and formed a cordon around them so no one would come near them, told them to take off their gear – helmets and shields – and then told them to go. No one wanted to hurt them, they just wanted their stuff. They got the two shields, and everyone walked behind them and the officers saw them running at them with the shields and they ran away."

Haitham and his friends reached the El Fath Mosque in Ramsis, where they saw armoured vehicles and tanks. They ducked for cover as they came under fire. The demonstrators scrabbled around for stones and bricks to throw back. The guy to his left lobbed a heavy rock at the tank and there was a shot back from it, the bullet landing squarely in his head.

"That's the first time I ever saw someone get killed in front of me," Haitham says. "I took him and ran to the hospital, through the side streets before we reached the city centre. I saw more security officers from the interior ministry, I was surprised that there was such a big group of them. I couldn't shake them off so I

ended up going in different directions, through different side roads. That was around 5.30 pm or 6 pm. We weren't in a big group; it was me and three of my friends. We were walking quietly and slowly, sticking to the wall, being careful not to get arrested. We were determined not to get caught and arrested."

When Haitham and his friends reached the main road they saw the burnt out shell of a police car that had been set on fire. They asked the other protesters what was going on and they said that the state security officers had retreated.

"It was unexpected," he says. "We're sure no one who went out on that day expected that to happen. There was a feeling that the country was going to go to hell, what was going to happen without them."

"On that day we understood how a state should be because the people had

protected themselves and their areas and the state didn't protect them, it only protected themselves. We also found out that if the ruling party found they were under threat or in danger, their military ran away. In the end the Egyptian people realised on that day that they are able to protect themselves."

"One of the funniest things that happened on that day was people handing out cold drinks and saying, we bought these with the money the authorities stole from the people, that they then took to the national party headquarters."

The seven-storey Interior Ministry building towers over where the demonstrators had gathered in Tahrir Square. A circle of snipers had been put in place to protect the ministry and they were shooting anyone arriving to join the demonstrators.

Haitham had to think of a way to stop them firing. There were wounded people all around yet to reach the field hospital they had to get past the snipers.

He walked over to the military officers guarding the area and asked them to form a barrier in front of the Interior Ministry to reassure the staff that they were protected, with the hope that it would stop the shooting.

The army refused, so two doctors tried to pick their way through, their white coats visible. One soldier eventually held up a hand and beckoned them over. They would allow them to pass, pull out the bodies and give them safe passage to the hospital.

But as the white coats approached, the snipers caught them in their crosshairs and fired, killing them both.

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At the time of the revolution, Omar Magdy, the student dentist, was in his final year at university. On the day of rage, Friday 28, or gomot el-ghaddab as it's

referred to in Arabic, he was in Giza with some friends playing computer games. They wound the wires around their consoles and decided it was time to head down to the protests.

As they approached the Dokki neighbourhood, which borders Tahrir Square, they could see the bridge which connects the two areas across the Nile. On the other side they saw millions of people interspersed with soldiers and police officers.

Omar jolted backwards, looked down and realised that the man in front of him had been shot in the chest, the bullet passing through him and cracking the middle bone of his chest. He was taken to a makeshift field hospital for treatment but Omar offered his own services instead.

“Do you know how to do stitches?” asked Sarah, one of the doctors, as she bandaged the wounded man’s chest.

“Yes, simple ones,” Omar replied.

“Okay, don’t ever do stitches on someone’s face so you don’t leave a scar.”

He nodded and dived back into the crowd.

“Most of them were shotgun injuries. I just took out the bullets. Some of them needed some stitches, small stitches one or two,” Omar recalls. “Most of the people needed CPR, they couldn’t get out of their coma, couldn’t breathe. I just made the airway space for CPR. Then some people volunteered with the gas mask, the oxygen. Just a tank of oxygen, with the tube. You don't have the ability to change it per patient, everyone used the same mask, but desperate times called for desperate measures.”

“Actually, I saw some cars run over some people. I saw it with my own eyes,” he adds.

“I gathered the skull shatters of some people. The bullet went through his head, shattering his head. You have to get his brain back to his skull.”

“It was like waves actually. I'm speaking about Friday prayers. It was around 12 or 1 pm. At that time, maybe some water will be thrown over the protesters. An hour after that the gas bombs started to be thrown. After that, after like 15 minutes, 20 minutes, we’re speaking about shotguns. Then they used machine guns to attack the people. It was like Judgement Day in Egypt.”

“Everything was allowed, people were run over by cars,” Omar continues. “Then around sunset a type of military force was brought in. We call it al-haras al-gomhory or the presidential guards there in Egypt, they are not private, they're part of the army. They dress like an army but just a code, a colour code on the shoulders, and the cap is written differently, and they have another symbol, yet they dress like an army. The presidential guard went down with tanks. They ran over people with tanks as well.”

As the army closed in, somewhere among the crowd Ghada and her husband Hisham walked from Mustafa Mahmoud until they reached El-Galaa Bridge. Security forces shot at them. They broke through the security cordon that had been erected there and headed to Kasr El-Nile Bridge where demonstrators were kneeling for the asr prayer.

Ghada and some friends stood on the pavement, waiting for Hisham to finish praying. From her position she could see police firing at the worshippers with water cannon and then tear gas. It was 3.30 pm and telephone networks were still down. She lost sight of him amid the smoke and was unable to contact him for the rest of the day.

They were eventually reunited at 9.30 pm that evening in Tahrir Square. “He told me, we will rename the square the lovers’ meeting point because we stayed half a day not knowing anything about each other.”

THE BATTLE OF THE CAMEL

"When you call for justice you draw your strength from it." Ghada Najibe, political activist.

On the sixth day into the protest, F-16s flew fast and low over the demonstrators gathered in Tahrir Square. The army was deployed onto the surrounding streets. All entrances were blocked so no medics could get to the injured protesters in the square.

In the early hours of each morning Ghada said goodbye to her husband and

settled down in one of the tents for the night. She would remind him of her dreams for social justice first planted in high school, when she and the other 60 girls handed out leaflets in the Pepsi factory and she told him she wouldn't go home until Mubarak stood down.

That day she asked Hisham to bring her children to the square. When they arrived, she hugged her sons and daughter and in a moment of fear told her husband: "They will kill us now."

"Every time I remember this moment, I feel strange," Ghada recalls. "What would happen if he actually did it and killed us? I was just worried about my kids, not me."

Until now, the protesters had been taking water from the Omar Makram mosque, which stood in Tahrir Square and is named after an 18th century Egyptian political leader who helped fight off the French invasion. The regime cut the water supply and the protesters were getting thirsty.

Luckily, workers in the nearby Arab Contractors site opened their doors and gave the demonstrators water.

At 9.30 pm that evening Ghada's mother called her, begging her to leave. "They'll throw fire bombs at you," she told her daughter down the phone line, repeating what had been said on state television.

"Mum, don't believe that, there's nothing like this here," she replied.

"Please, for the sake of your children just go home," she repeated. When she realised her daughter's mind could not be changed, she hung up.

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The next day, at 10 pm, Hosni Mubarak attempted to win the crowd over:

"Hosni Mubarak, who speaks to you today, is proud of the long years he spent in the service of Egypt and its people," he said. "This dear nation is my country, it is the country of all Egyptians. Here I have lived and fought for its sake and I defended its land, its sovereignty and interests, and on this land I will die and history will judge me and others for our merits and faults."

He promised that neither he nor his son Gamal would run for power in the 2011 elections.

The crowd was divided. Some felt sorry for him – should we give him six months, they asked? Over the course of the evening many people left the square. Fathers and mothers came to pick up their children – for some of the demonstrators, it was over.

"The Egyptians are emotional people, and Hosni Mubarak was playing on their emotions. But the group of people who actually took to the streets and protested against Hosni Mubarak? This tactic didn't work on them. Maybe it worked on family or parents at home," says Khalid.

"He said he wasn't going to run again and started to make changes; he changed the prime minister, Habib Adly. The main group of people participating were educated, 95 per cent of the people participating were the middle class who were educated and understood the political scene, the systematic poverty, and how Hosni Mubarak was dealing with Egyptians. They understood how the regime dealt with the people and what messages they were using. So they weren't really influenced by his speech, and were generally unaffected by what he said."

On 1 February, the day of Mubarak's speech, Mosa'ab Elshamy – the pharmacy student turned budding photojournalist – stood up, dusted off his clothes and headed to a friend's house in Giza, close to Nazlet El-Semman, a village famous

for its tourist industry workers. He was in desperate need of a shower and a real bed.

The next morning, feeling somewhat restored, Mosa'ab left his friend's house in Giza and headed back to the square, but his passage was blocked. Outside, men on horse carts and camels filled the streets, heading in the same direction as he was. He looked at them, dumbfounded. What on earth was going on?

Mosa'ab couldn't get past the security cordon surrounding the square, so he called friends who were on the inside: "What's happening in there?" he asked them. He could see thugs attacking people at the entrances with chunks of pavement and shards of glass. A battle was raging across downtown Cairo. Tahrir Square was under siege.

"Tahrir was just defending itself. Anyone on the inside was attacking as well," he recalls. "While I was on the outside it was extremely tricky because I was trying to go in, but you couldn't go in. Anyone who was suspected of being part of the revolution on the outside, whether those who were trying to send in aid or medical supplies or blankets, they would get arrested and they would get beaten on the spot and their stuff would get confiscated and sometimes they would be handed to the military. So it took me pretty much all day to try and go in. And I only got in during one of those lulls during the fighting. I was able to charge in and, you know, let people know that I am on their side."

Sometime between midday and 1 pm on 2 February 2011, Mubarak's beltagayya began streaming into Tahrir Square on horses and camels, brandishing swords, machetes and knives. From 28 January the army had in place a security cordon around the square where they would search protesters for weapons before they were allowed in.

"They must have opened the cordon and let the thugs in," says Ali.

The regime had paid people from Nazlet El-Semman to stir up trouble in the square: “These protests are going to affect tourism and the country,” they told them. “They’re the reason your livelihood has been cut off. They’re hindering and disrupting tourism.”

“When the attack started, people came out of the tents and grouped together,” recalls Ali. “We would jump up on the horse and pull the people off. We had an adrenaline rush, that someone was trying to come and steal and they don’t really comprehend what’s happening, that a revolution is happening. They didn’t know anything about the regime, they were just being used. We fought off a lot of people with police badges. The first confrontation was done in a few minutes. Some were able to run away, others we were able to capture.”

“Then the main confrontation happened. It started from the Hilton next to the Egyptian museum, from that entrance. There’s another entrance to Talaat Harb, where the founder of the Egyptian bank has an entrance named after him. Those were the two entrances where it was the most intense. This time, there were a lot more of the thugs and they had molotov cocktails and stones. They got up on the building but we were able to bring them down. Then we formed a blockade, from the late afternoon until early next morning. So everyone in the square was on standby and protecting it. I got hurt but went straight back and we stood for a number of hours guarding it.”

“People were defending the square with their lives,” Ali continues. “To everyone the square was their home, someone is trying to take you out of your house. We also saw the dream that we had on the verge of coming true and someone is coming to try and take it from you. There were women, the elderly, little girls with their parents. People of all ages were in Tahrir Square. Even though it was a small number of people, there was everyone from every age group. Everyone was standing around the edge of the square. Everyone was standing and waiting for confrontation, no one was sitting. The women were standing behind the men, anyone hurt was immediately seen to. On that day the thugs were throwing stones and pieces of ceramic at them. I got hit in the head and the mark is still there. They’re really heavy and they do a lot of damage. People were bleeding, then would just wrap something around it and continue. That day I got hit with a molotov cocktail in the leg and thankfully it wasn’t that bad, it wasn’t a severe injury. So I bandaged up the wound and went back.”

Ali and his friends went to a hardware shop whose owner had abandoned it whilst the demonstrations went on. They took some wood and used it to build a barricade whilst women sat on the pavement, pulling the asphalt off so they could use it to defend themselves.

In a memory that encapsulates the spirit of Tahrir in those 18 days, when they had forced the thugs out of the square, Ali and his friends disassembled the barricade and returned the wood. But a lot would happen before they did that.

“I remember an old man inside the Egyptian museum, there were two clashes that day, in the afternoon and later in the day,” recalls Ali. “We were standing

next to the Egyptian museum and formed a human chain so that the beltagayya couldn't come in. We weren't guarding the museum but trying to stop them getting into Tahrir Square, there was an entrance there. There were also firefighters there and military officers guarding it. There was a heavy military presence."

"The people lost trust in the military that day because of their presence there. Because it was the military officers in the army that allowed the beltagayya to enter with weapons. An old guy, around 60, he was scared. There were a lot of attacks with molotov cocktails. People in Tahrir Square were defenceless but the thugs had molotovs. The old man would take a step forward and then two steps back. One of the times he went forward and a molotov cocktail hit him. We all jumped on him trying to extinguish the fire. I was talking to one of the military officers and next to him was a firefighter. I was yelling at the military officer to give the order to the officer. He had a water hose, I was telling him to hose the man down and he refused."

"At that point I was thinking, I want to protect civilisation and the man was more important than bricks," recalls Ali. "Seeing the man burn in front of me, it was like humanity was on fire, it was being burned. I remember very clearly seeing an army soldier and the man on fire and he refused to spare even a bit of water but thankfully the fire was extinguished. The guys all around quickly put him out. It was very impactful to me and really significant that this old man wasn't scared of anything and very motivational for them."

"It also showed me that there are people like that old man willing to give it all and fight, and others who would see a man on fire and didn't care."

The battle burned through the night. Mosa'ab, who didn't yet have a camera, was tweeting, willing the square to hold on until the morning. "It felt that if people could hold their ground until the morning, the revolution would succeed

or essentially stay alive."

He was right. From that moment, President Hosni Mubarak, who had ruled Egypt for 30 years, became chief architect of his own downfall. The entire battle was streamed online – observers could see clearly from the footage who was responsible for the attacks. The next day it was standing room only in Tahrir Square, with around 100,000 people inside and 300,000 in the surrounding areas.

"After those events were reported to the people outside of Tahrir Square, by the morning it was so full I couldn't stand," says Ali. "It went from being an empty square to in the morning to anyone who had family in the square came to check on them. Then a lot of people, the ones who had thought Hosni Mubarak was genuine and went home, realised it wasn't going to happen. Those people came back and brought their families. I feel like the actual day Mubarak was overthrown was on that day, both to the outside and inside world."

"They said at the time the NDP was responsible," he continues. "There was incitement in the media, they explicitly said this, no one was trying to hide it. Not just senior figures in the party but even people. Mortada Mansour, other people who were with the government. They were actually saying, rallying people to go to the Battle of the Camel, to go to Tahrir Square. From the thugs we captured that day some of them were from the police and security agencies, some were from the military and some were informants."

On 12 February 2011, Hosni Mubarak stood down. The crowd went wild. Protesters who had ducked bullets from the tanks just days before, offered flowers to the soldiers guarding the square. Ali's friend wrapped himself in Egyptian flags – one around his neck, the other across his shoulders.

"The Battle of the Camel was a turning point. The most important point in the

whole revolution after the Friday of anger," says Khalid. "A lot of people woke up to the fact that the regime was setting Egyptians against Egyptians; some saw it as a civil war, an idea the regime began to promote, by using words like 'chaos' and 'disorder'."

Whilst some were ecstatic, others feared deeply for the years ahead.

"The problem is that people were thinking Hosni Mubarak is the problem and has to be defeated and stand down but the biggest problem is the military council," says Haitham. "If they stay, this is going to be a disaster. And that's what happened. After Mubarak stood down, everyone was chanting and saying, we've won. I was actually crying a lot that day but because I was just thinking of the disaster that was coming. That's all I could think about."

"Since we weren't able to get rid of the source of the regime, one should know or realise their retaliation is going to be very fierce and aggressive and that's what we're seeing right now."

"The first time we saw the army in the street with us. They kissed us and gave us hugs and said: 'We are with you and we are with the people, we are the army of the people.' Yeah we were crying," says Osama Gaweesh. "We felt that yeah, we've got the army with us against Mubarak, we will do it, and we did it. But a few days after the revolution after the 11th of February the army totally turned against the revolution, the High Military Council, with Mohammed Hussein Tantawi, he was the chief of military intelligence, they started working against the revolution and the political parties who led the situation in Egypt in 2011 were naive. They never believed that the army could counter, or perform a military coup against the revolution; this won't happen, they said."

MASSACRE

"I was declared dead after 40 minutes." Omar Magdy, field hospital doctor

17 December 2011. The sun is low in the sky, the nights are drawing in. Egyptians are a long way from their goal of a civilian government, despite the promises that filled the air after Mubarak's departure.

Inside Egypt, demonstrators gather to express anger at the ruling SCAF party who were only ever supposed to be an interim government negotiating the transition of power. It's taking too long; Egyptians are impatient for real change.

Outside Egypt, an image goes viral: a young woman lies flat on her back, her black abaya gathered around her shoulders exposing her blue bra. Army soldiers with visors gather around her, one dragging each arm, the other with his foot raised mid-air, about to crunch it onto her stomach. It stands in stark contrast with the euphoric images which filled the corners and passageways of the capital just ten months earlier.

Ghada Najibe is pregnant with her fourth child. It's the sixth month and her rounded belly protrudes from underneath her clothing. She's at the protest, on her way home. The woman on the floor is not an isolated incident – the army is

violently breaking up the demonstrations all over the country.

As she turns into the street where the Kasr Al-Dobara Evangelical Church is situated Ghada feels someone grab her arm. Today, she knows who the arm belongs to: Hossam El-Din from Fayyoum.

“I swear on your mother’s life I will make you give birth now and make you pregnant again,” he told her as he dragged her down the streets.

“Respect yourself,” she told him as he groped her. “Put your hands down. You don’t have any honour, your mother didn’t raise you well. How can you grab me like that?”

Her rebuke riled him up and he beckoned the other soldiers over and asked them to join him in a sexual party, with Ghada at the centre of it.

One soldier came and pulled her to one side. “When I tell you to run, run. Don’t even hesitate for one minute.” He looked around to see if anyone was listening. “Don’t go into Tahrir. Go back to the street where the Al-Dobra church is.”

He moved a few steps forward. “Run,” he said under his breath. “Run now and don’t look back.”

Ghada did as she was told until she reached the church and collapsed on the cold floor inside. She couldn’t feel her legs, her whole body felt as though it was paralysed. Later, when she gave birth to a healthy baby boy, she called him Thaer-Revolut, after the revolution.

“It was probably organised by the SCAF to attack and insult any woman or girl they meet,” she reflects now. “For example, when there was a girl and a boy, they arrested the girl instead. They intended to insult and break the women in a cruel way.”

Ghada’s story is just one small step in a series of orchestrated events which led up to the army’s complete take-over of power, which would culminate in the overthrow of Egypt’s first elected President Mohamed Morsi on 3 July 2013, and descend on the other side into unchecked brutality.

“The coup was almost becoming inevitable by that summer of 2013,” recalls Mosa’ab. “Society was extremely polarised, the media was extremely polarised. Morsi had lost many, many of his allies who had allied with him even temporarily, or just out of interest in keeping [former Prime Minister Ahmed] Shafiq out during the elections. And it seems that Morsi and his Brotherhood movement were not really interested in achieving the goals of the revolution either. On the other side, there was a lot of movement in terms of pro-Mubaraks coming back to the forefront, coming back to the media, people asking the military to intervene. Sisi became much more outspoken, taking more of a role starting from his surprise appointment as a military or as a defence minister and as chief of army, to the day he led the coup.”

Nine days after the coup, on 8 July 2013, Omar Magdy was kneeling to pray fajr when he heard gunshots. Dawn was breaking and demonstrators were on Salah Salem Road, outside the Republican Guard Headquarters, where it was believed the president was being held. They were under siege.

“I was injured during the revolution three times, got captured and tortured two times. But the heaviest injury was in il-harass il-jumhuri on 8 July 2013,” recalls Omar.

“It was after the sunrise prayers, fajir, I was shot from one metre away. I had like 600 pieces out of my right leg, from my left leg 401. I got another bullet right below the aorta by three millimetres and I got another one, breaking my lower jaw here, cracking two teeth at the top.”

"Also the army started to shoot. After that I was lying down for like an hour. I was left there, bleeding for an hour. Then they carried me, the people ran under fire and carried me, I also got the video of them carrying me while I'm shot. Then they put me in an ambulance. I stopped breathing. They tried to carry out CPR. I caught my breath again. I went to the hospital, then I stopped breathing again. They did CPR inside. Then I was declared dead after 40 minutes. 10, 20, 30, 40. I was supposed to be put in the morgue."

"At the final stage, when he was pushing back the door in order to close it, I caught my breath again. The man who was carrying me thought I was a ghost and he threw me away. I fell on the floor. At that time two of my shoulders totally dislocated out of position. I couldn't move my chest. I could speak but speaking makes it harder. I cannot move both of my legs, and the pain was horrible. I can feel it in every inch of my body."

"Even though it was summer I was so cold."

"After that, the army started to circle the hospital with tanks," Omar continues. "My friend had already called my family. My family lives 1,000 kilometres from Cairo. They took an airplane and came, they weren't there yet, but my uncle, he's dead now, my uncle, at the time he was a retired army forces enforcer. He was living nearby. He used his car to infiltrate the army circle then put me in his car, and I got out. While I was going out, I saw the army arresting the injured. Then I saw the newspapers saying that they were terrorists trying to attack the army."

The atmosphere across Egypt was tense. Serious campaigns had been launched against political parties and activists, including the 6 April movement, not long after their leader Ahmed Maher announced that they were withdrawing from the road map and said that what had happened was clearly a military coup. Opposition groups were defamed in the media and the ruling authorities tried to

push the idea that they were all hand in hand with the Muslim Brotherhood.

Rumours were spreading that there would be more violence, this time to break up protesters who were occupying Rabaa and Ennahda squares. In an attempt to calm the situation, the 6 April movement released a statement saying that violence shouldn't be used. It made no difference. On 13 August 2013 the Egyptian army orchestrated the most brutal massacre in Egypt's modern history.

As the soldiers moved into Rabaa Square, Ali was in a side street with a group of other young men, just behind where the statue of Rabi'a, the Muslim saint and Sufi mystic who the square is named after, stands.

There was not the same elation that filled Tahrir Square, the sense of concern and worry was tangible. The unity that so many demonstrators remembered from 25 January had been replaced with division and polarisation.

Tanks surrounded the square, heightening the tension. One of the soldiers leaned to the side and pulled the trigger, aiming straight at the demonstrators.

"He's killing them like chickens," Ali said to his friend, and then paused. "Not even chickens are killed like that."

Also at the protest was his friend, the one who had wrapped several Egyptian flags around him that day in Tahrir Square when Hosni Mubarak stood down. He was killed.

"Every time I remember how happy he was with the flags, if he knew three years later he would be killed, I don't think he'd be happy to have all the flags wrapped around him."

In total, Ali has lost six friends since the revolution.

At the time of the Rabaa massacre, Osama Gaweesh was working at a hospital in Damietta as a quality manager. At 9 am he tried to enter Rabaa Square but bullets were flying everywhere and it was difficult to move. He stayed on the outskirts, carrying the injured, including his friends, to hospital.

Mosa'ab, who had by now documented the cheer in the days following Hosni Mubarak's resignation, the violence that followed it, and the courage of the young men who continued to go out and protest regardless, turned his lens on the unfolding bloodbath.

He captured a young man in a face mask, flames and destroyed tents surrounding him; he got close to the bodies in the morgue lying on the cold concrete, their hands tied together with white strips, the bare soles of their feet tinged yellow:

"One of the photos I took was a photo I took towards the end of the day and it's an image that shows the square, almost on fire, and a man sitting on, I think a water cooler or something. He is looking towards that fire with just a lot of stuff on the floor, you know some fruit, the tents that were destroyed. There is a huge cloud of smoke as well and behind that smoke is the security forces on the other side. He's almost resigned, he realises that, you know, kind of the heaviness of that day. And it's a picture that I think describes a lot of what happened that day, and the destruction and the heaviness of it, and the cruelty that was applied."

"The work I did during that day, I tried to be everywhere," Mosa'ab continues. "I tried to take pictures of the many bodies that were put in makeshift morgues. I tried to put pictures of the women who were breaking stones and trying to deliver it to the frontlines. I tried to take pictures of the medics whose colleagues were killed."

"I tried to take photos of the loss that people felt as they identify their loved ones and saw them in the morgue. I think I tried to show the scale of that, which even to myself as someone who had started covering violence in Egypt, I could never perceive and expect that such a thing could happen."

Mosa'ab continues: "There is a moment of a man, I found his cousin inside, I think it was the mosque, I think it was one of the buildings attached to the mosque and a few days before I had been in that hall and it was used as a press centre. And now it was another makeshift morgue because they were running out of space to put people. And when I went to check it, I couldn't even walk because of how condensed it was by the dead bodies and there was a man there who had just seen his cousin killed, and he just held his hand and he

grieved over his body. And I just tried to get close and to take a picture of that moment and just show this, you know, extremely saddening moment and just loss, in my opinion. And I think that moment is one that I remember a lot. It's just the fact that he seemed to be in his own world consumed by his own grief. There were so many other people around him, there was blood on the floor, but he just wanted to spend those last moments with his cousin. Then I left."

Haitham was also there, searching desperately for someone with an escape plan:

"The two best days of my entire life were the 28th of January ... it was literally the best day of my life; I was hitting the ground to feel it was under me and check it wasn't a dream. On that day I felt like the land was owned by the people. That day is the best example of goodness within the Egyptian people. The second-best day was Eid Al-Adha in Rabaa. The spirit and atmosphere of the people and everyone on that day was amazing, everyone forgot their differences."

"There are a lot of differences between Rabaa and Tahrir," Haitham continues. "In Tahrir there was a lot of hope and little differences between the people. In Rabaa the people were shocked. The situation was divided. There were the Muslim Brotherhood supporters who hoped this would lead to the return of their rule. There were the people who were against military rule and knew that we're headed for disaster but were also trying to reduce the losses or damages. I was in Rabaa because I thought we hit a wall and we were headed for disaster. I couldn't stand by and watch someone being treated unjustly. By injustice I mean someone shouldn't be killed or attacked."

"On a very personal level Rabaa was the end of that part of the Egyptian revolution and the defeat of any ideals of the revolution at the time, which had

to do with unity, which had to do with logic, which had to do with humanity, which were all very noble ideas, and to see Rabaa happen in that way and then be cheered on by so many people identified a rise of a new level and they started a new chapter that we continue to live in, in Egypt, one of complete disregard of human life and of sacredness of the soul and of respect to any human rights or any differing opinions," adds Mosa'ab.

"So, and you can almost always trace anything that happens in Egypt, ever since, to that day of Rabaa. It's a day that, you know, people are collectively traumatised by whether they believe it or not, in my opinion, and until that day becomes resolved, and until people can talk about trauma then I feel like this memory will just keep being there."

Ali, who was studying for his master's when the revolution broke out, never finished it because he ended up in prison instead. He was arrested, along with thousands of others, on the day of the Rabaa massacre.

On 18 August he was put into one of Egypt's notorious prison vans. Navy blue with tiny windows at the top that are covered in a wire mesh, pre-revolution they would hurtle down Cairo's busy streets and people would turn to look at them, hoping they'd never find themselves inside.

The van pulled to a halt outside Abu Zabaal Prison on the outskirts of Cairo. From his position, Ali could see the van next to him. They were parked in rows, their engines switched off and the prisoners inside sweltering in the heat which was close to 40 degrees.

There were roughly 44 of them handcuffed together and there was no air inside. The guy to Ali's right passed out.

"Someone who was with me in the vehicle had been shot in his thigh and his

thigh had exploded," recalls Ali. "They were with the back of the rifles hitting him on that bullet hole and he was holding my hand and saying, kill me, I can't stand it anymore. I don't know if he survived, I took my t-shirt and tried to apply pressure. Afterwards they assigned us to different prisons, but from morning to 1 am, for 12 hours, he was bleeding. I don't know if he's alive or not. I was the one carrying him because anyone who was conscious carried them."

Just as Ali was about to lose consciousness, he heard the sound of the van doors being unlocked. One of the officers knew someone inside the van and unfastened the safety bolts. A wave of oxygen washed over them. At that point they didn't realise it, but this tiny blast of air had saved their lives.

They were ordered out of the van and they stood in a line, against the backdrop of the prison. One of the officers doused them in petrol. "We're going to set you on fire," he said to them, before ordering them back into the van.

In the vehicle parallel to them the prisoners inside weren't faring so well. There were 45 of them in a space big enough for 24; 37 of them died. Among the seven survivors was Mustafa Kassem, the US citizen who would later become the first American to die in an Egyptian prison cell.

At the time it was widely reported that the prisoners died from asphyxiation after the officers threw tear gas into the van, but Ali thinks they died before that and the gas was designed to cover up how much they had suffered.

Ali and Mustafa shared a prison cell for several years after the incident and got to know one another very well over the years. Mustafa was asked multiple times to give up his Egyptian citizenship. He refused.

Ali recalls two prisoners being tortured to death, their bodies being left to rot in the cell for two weeks.

When he was released from prison Ali returned to Kerdasa. He is proud of its heritage but sad at what his village has witnessed. More than 200 death sentences have been issued to the people there.

There were happy moments, like his engagement, but the authorities were hounding him, determined that he would pay the price for standing up to the regime.

"On the day of my wedding I expected the security forces would try to come," he says. "My friends were standing at different entrances to the city. They came and one of my friends let me know and me and my wife escaped to the cemetery then went to a hotel outside the city."

"They went to my house because they expected I would go home. When they didn't find me there, they just destroyed the house. Even my car, they tore apart all the seats in the car. They destroyed our new apartment, everything was new, they destroyed everything in it. We had dinner ready in the house and the police officers sat and ate the food. They're just so rude. My wife said, if we knew they were going to eat the food we would have poisoned it."

Like salt being aggressively rubbed into a very deep and painful wound, the Sisi government went on to try and convince the world that they remained popular. It is a source of endless fury for them that the revolutionaries refuse to toe the line.

EXILE

"If I regret anything, I only regret not having done more." Sara Mohani, journalist

It's been seven years since the Rabaa massacre, ten since the Egyptian uprising which rocked Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo on that winter morning of 2011. The revolutionaries who led that day of momentous change have been rebranded terrorists by the state and its institutions.

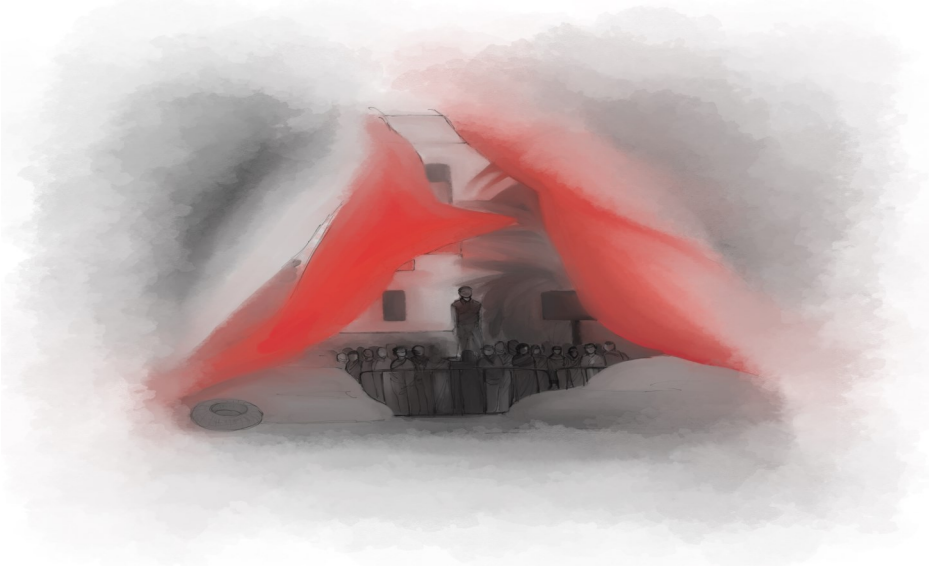
Women no longer stand at the gates of Tahrir Square demanding a role in political life and describing Egypt as "utopia." They are raped in prison, in cells next to schoolboys, whilst journalists are hung from the ceiling by one leg.

"About 200 female prisoners have been forcibly disappeared," says Haitham. "Some of them have been disappeared for several years. There is a mother and a newborn, they've been gone for over 2.5 years. No one knows anything about them. There's a lady named Nisreen from Arish in northern Sinai and she's been disappeared for several years. We have some evidence that there are some foreign women who have been disappeared for several years."

"There was an incident with a boat which was carrying refugees, it was announced officially that they had drowned," he continues. "Some of them were Palestinians and they were arrested along with their wives. Since that incident five years ago, no one knows where they are. We have also released testimonies relayed to us from people who are forcibly disappeared in centres that belong to the National Security Agency. One of the stories was about the severe torture of an Egyptian woman, because she was helping out some of the families of prisoners and taking care of them."

"Any man or woman who enters state security in Egypt, do you know what the procedure is?" Haitham asks. "The first thing that happens to them is that they're stripped naked or raped. Can you imagine your sister, daughter, this happening to them? Is that ok?"

"Revenge is being taken on women because they participated in the revolution, and their voices were very loud and very organised, and there were even women -only demonstrations, the girls spoke out and wrote; they were unafraid," adds Sara.



"The participation of Egyptian women in the revolution and in political life is so far very strong, and it is something that makes me proud that I am Egyptian. I saw in other countries where revolutions took place the role of women was very weak in terms of participation, however in Egypt it was completely different."

"They terrorise parents through girls. Who is your daughter, they say, we can do this to your daughter, and they threat the parents that they will rape their daughters. The parents always have a weak spot for daughters, they don't ever

want anyone to torture her or hit her, they don't want her to be exposed to any kind of danger. That's why the authorities always use this as their weak point."

"Yet those hazy days when everyone thought Mubarak wouldn't stand down – and then he did – they're not lost. They're inside every Egyptian, whether they like it or not."

"I remember the hope that was in our eyes and the love for change, a love for the rule of justice in the country," recalls Sara. "I am very proud that I participated in the revolution, and I do not regret it for a moment. I see now that there is a tone in some people's words making comparisons like 'during the days of Hosni Mubarak we were living like this', but no, that's wrong, it is wrong to feel like that. The revolution broke the barrier of fear and that is the biggest victory. People on the street were afraid to say the name of the president, even a positive comment."

"People were afraid. But now, no, people now swear on social media, and they even get arrested, but it's still okay for them. People were shouting, they were throwing themselves into the fire, and still, until now, even with the current oppressive regime, which is much more terrible than the regime of Hosni Mubarak, people like to speak, even if there is still fear, people are willing to speak, they are not silent anymore, even if only between each other and on social media. The January revolution broke the barrier of fear; it destroyed it completely, and this is a point of pride, we remain happy about it. And if the time comes again, I will protest again, and do more than what I did the first time around. If I regret anything, I only regret not having done more."

"When I think about the revolution I think of a sense of despair," says Ali. "I had such high hopes for Egypt, I thought we'd be in a different place. I got goosebumps, I told people, hold your head up high you're an Egyptian. At that

time, everyone raised their heads, and they felt a sense of pride. The whole situation now, it's the opposite. Unfortunately, whenever Egypt is mentioned, I think of murder. I've had several near-death experiences, but luckily, I survived them."

"Of course, I feel proud, I don't regret anything," Ali continues. "I don't regret January, the first day I joined. If it were to happen again, I would just do the same. We chose from the available and best options that we had at the time. The January revolution is the most honourable thing that happened in Egypt and the whole momentum that surrounded it in history, that the people were able to gather to ask for a single demand."

"Our mistake was that we didn't stay in Tahrir Square until our demands were met. We could have put pressure on the military to meet our demands and fix the problems but generally I'm very proud of the revolution. a young guy, I'm not speaking from a position of leadership, I'm just a man who participated. I'm speaking as an ordinary guy. It's something we had a lot of hope in. I wasn't able to make a change, so I take responsibility for this. Everyone should bear this responsibility, I'm very, very proud."

After the security forces crashed Ali's wedding and ate the food that had been prepared for him and his wife they continued to return to the house to look for him. Ali was certain, though, that he didn't want to leave Egypt. "I kept thinking, people are in prison, I need to defend them. I believed at the time I needed to stay."

Eventually, he decided it was too dangerous for his mother and his sisters and he left the country. "At that time there was not even a glimmer of hope. The movement had stopped, no one was going out to protest. There was a deep state of division in the country, even within the Islamic movement, so I took the

risk and left the country."

That was 25 November, 2015. He recalled conversations he'd had with his relatives who remembered the days of Nasser – "Change isn't going to come quickly," they had told him. "It's bigger than this and it doesn't happen that quickly."

"The revolution was an act of pride, you have to be proud of that," Omar reflects. "Whether you lost something precious within you or didn't lose anything. You must be proud. And we must survive that, we have to get over that because injustice will not last forever. Justice and injustice, they take turns. This is life, ups and downs. So now we're in down times, but we will come up again. I believe in that."

"What happened is that freedom got defeated. This is what happened. People got killed. I was attending the protests through 2011. I saw old men getting killed. I saw young ladies getting raped in the middle of the square. I saw kids. Yes, I saw kids getting killed. We buried a lot of friends. A lot of other friends went to prison, serving for 30, 40, 50 years. Me myself, I got condemned for 65 years in total. This is what happened. Good men, lost."

"I've heard terrible stories," he continues. "I've seen kids being tortured; kids being raped. For the last case I was working on I was speaking with a mother. Her kid was, as I recall, 14-years-old. He was captured and the police officer ordered the prisoners to rape him. And they were raping him daily."

"She says on my last visit, I know that they're taking my kid to get... and she starts crying. But that time I couldn't take it anymore. What did a 14-year-old kid do to get such punishment? Some of the people, me myself I got tortured, yes, I got hanged for two weeks, I got electrocuted, I got one of my teeth broken, two

ribs got broken, yet I was old enough. I was 20-21, I could take it at the time."

In 2016, five years after he had worked in the field hospital in Tahrir Square and three years after he had been pronounced dead, Omar's clinic in Aswan was burnt down. He was threatened, not long after, that he would be captured dead or alive. He was sentenced to 65 years in prison.

As he stared at the rubble of the clinic, he had saved so hard to build, Omar's phone vibrated in his pocket. When he answered, the person on the other end introduced himself as Abbas Kamel, former chief of staff under Sisi.

"If you go on national television and apologise, I will reward you with being a council member," the voice said.

"No," said Omar, "I cannot accept that."

As he hung up, Omar knew that if he stayed for one more night, he would be dead. "Within a week I was out of Egypt. I paid bribes. I paid in total $65,000. In Egyptian pounds that's a fortune."

"Oh, yes, I was scared but I will deny it, because you know, in my region, it's not good for a man to feel scared. Of course, I was scared."

Omar is living in Istanbul. On 15 October this year he married a Turkish woman.

"In Egypt I had to change my house every two weeks. I couldn't make friends, I couldn't speak with anyone, I had to live alone. The feeling of being chased, being captured, and put in prison for 65 years. I don't know how many years I will live, but I've done nothing to be rewarded with 65 years," Osama says.

"And when that officer called me, telling me about the offer that everything will be gone and then I will be a council member that I'll be rewarded, I felt

disgusted. I wasn't happy. Some people told me, you should be happy, take it, everything will go away. This is not right, I'm disgusted. I couldn't have woken up every day and looked in the mirror. I couldn't have respected myself if I did that. I'd rather be killed than do that. Of course, I've been through hard times, some days, I couldn't find food. Some days I slept in the street. Some days even though I wasn't supposed to work, I just continued with surgery anyway and the police were circling my place. I jumped from the first balcony. And I had to walk on my injured knee."

"You have to keep going. You have to suppress the pain you've been through. You have to survive. I have to survive to tell everyone how not to trust those military officers, how not to trust the global system, how not to trust the UN organisations. If they want people to trust them, they have to change their policy, they have to make right what they've done wrong for years. I've known families that were torn apart, all of the members are dead. I know a mother, she had three sons. One of them was killed, one was in prison. And the third one left Egypt. She lives by herself now. And another mother has to visit two sons in two separate prisons every week. She has to travel to this one for 400 kilometres then goes back and travels to the second one for 600 kilometres, weekly, and in order to prepare for the visit, she has to prepare for a whole day. So she travels five days. She cannot live her life."

"I feel nothing. I don't know how to say it, but I guess my feelings got killed."

On 24 January 2014, roughly two hours after a protest that had been held that day, Haitham Ghoniem was arrested. When he was released two years later, he went to Turkey to visit some friends. Shortly before he was due to return, a lawyer warned him his name had been put on a list. "Don't return," he was warned. "If you do, you'll be arrested."

Haitham had caught the attention of intelligence whilst working on an investigation into the location of the feared Scorpion Prison, where political prisoners are held and singled out for particularly rough treatment. He used satellite imagery to prove that it was actually inside the Tora Prison complex, not in the location thrown up on Google when you typed it in.

"After my second investigative report the National Security Agency directly contacted me and threatened me," says Haitham. "First, they just threatened me, then they officially cancelled my national ID number. I have an official paper or letter that says they did this. So far in Egypt, I'm the only person this has happened to."

Meanwhile, Osama Gaweesh was fighting a complaint lodged against him by a lawyer close to the Sisi regime requesting that his Egyptian nationality be dropped. He was still working as a dentist but at the same time, doing his best to lift a lid on the corruption and brutality of the state. He fled to Turkey. As a punitive measure, every time he publishes something critical of the regime, they destroy a little bit more of his clinic in Damietta.

"They sentenced me to five years in absentia, I faced a military trial, and they banned publishing anything about this trial, so I didn't know what my fate in this trial was," says Osama. "They put my name on a terrorist list three times, prevented me from renewing my passport, and they called on the Turkish authorities to extradite me. All of these events led me to be an asylum seeker and then a refugee in the UK."

"My family joined me after I fled Egypt – my parents and my wife, and my children in December 2013, and they have been living with me from that day. So, the only thing I left behind in Egypt is my house and my clinic. Every time I presented leaks or did something which revealed facts about this regime, they

stormed my house. They destroyed my clinic, they burned my house, burned the furniture, and did this maybe eight or nine times in five years. The last time, they went to my house again and destroyed the plaque outside. In Egypt as doctors, we put our names on a big panel in front of our house, so they

destroyed this panel."

"My homeland. I have one, it's Egypt," he continues. "However, it's been 10 years since the revolution and I am still here. Another 10 years, but one day I will go back to Tahrir Square. I will go back to my house; I will go back to my clinic. I will return to Egypt one day."

"Egypt is my home country. It's still my home country. It will be my home country. I will return to Egypt one day. I am telling my children about Egypt because they have no memories from Egypt. I'm telling them about Tahrir Square and telling them about the pyramids, about the Egyptian people, about the restaurants and about everything in Egypt. One day, I don't know when. But I believe this day will come soon. I will return to Egypt again. And the whole fake news, the whole false allegations against us, and accusing us as terrorists. We will return to Egypt and the Egyptian people will know us well."

On April 25, 2016, Sara Mohani was arrested whilst covering the demonstrations of Tiran and Sanafir in Al-Mesaha Square.

Eight months later she received a phone call from a lawyer who said she was wanted on a well-known legal case that several journalists have been added to. Within weeks she received a second phone call. She had been added to another.

She left the country and landed in Italy.

"I try to avoid looking at pictures or videos about Egypt because it breaks my heart," she says. "Why am I not there? Why am I not living happily with my family and friends and working in my country? Why don't I live with freedom without any threat? Why can't I live my life without the threat of being arrested and sent to prison? Why am I not living like normal people anywhere in the world?"

Ghada Najibe has not forgotten the military officer who sexually assaulted her outside the church on 17 December 2011. Neither, it seems, had he – Sisi, who was still a general himself, sent a message through one of her husband's friends that the officer would come with his commander and apologise to her in person and at the same time, she would drink a coffee with Sisi.

Hisham refused and so his wife was arrested at numerous protests.

On 15 October 2015 someone in the intelligence department advised Hisham to take his wife and leave:

“What is coming is bad,” he said. “We cannot protect her.”

Ghada received an arrest warrant on 9 December. One week later she was out of Egypt.

“I feel homesick when I remember Egypt,” says Ghada. “I feel bitterness, helplessness, bitterness of loss, and bitterness of a dream that has turned into a nightmare. I feel nostalgia for everything – streets, friends, cafes, cars, family, the memories. What I think about the most is that they took me away from my roots, I left my memories at this age and went to a new country and left all my life behind, everything that was part of shaping me is there. You feel you went only with a body and without a soul.”

“Of course, I feel proud for participating in the revolution,'' she continues. “It’s the greatest and best thing I’ve ever done in my life, the best thing I ever participated in. Even if I die and I don't do anything else, it’s enough for me that I participated on 25th January, I’m very proud and I have never regretted it. On the contrary, if I could turn back time, I would do exactly what I did again, I would stand against oppression again. I’m someone without any political ideology, I have never been affiliated to any movement or group, I belong to my ideas, principles and beliefs, and my principles refuse injustice. I will reject tyranny even if I pay the price for that.”

“On Facebook I wrote about a dream that I have every night since I left Egypt three years ago,” says Sara. “Every night it’s the same dream. I dream that I am trying to escape and run away but the police arrest me. The dream starts with me trying to be in places I love in Egypt, then turns into a nightmare that security is coming after me, that I am threatened, and I want to run, but I can't

run. This dream has been chasing me for three years every night. Although I'm getting psychological treatment, I haven’t really healed until now.”

“It’s impossible for us to regret the revolution, it’s the greatest event I witnessed in my life. The January revolution is the greatest thing to happen in Egypt’s modern history. Egypt is a nation that refuses tyranny, and this cost them their lives,” says Khalid.

“Now that the revolution is almost a distant memory, it's very easy to look at it without nostalgia, without emotions, and to try and be critical of how the revolution went wrong, and what part everyone played in making it reach the fate that it's reached now,” says Mosa'ab.

“Because at the time, it was just impossible to believe that 10 years from now, things are not only going to be bad, they’re going to be worse than ever. It's very easy to get nostalgic for those days. But I think it's even more important to think about why it went wrong, and take lessons from that. And just as the world was, you know, one day looking up to Tahrir and trying to take signs and to try and be inspired by Tahrir, now it's important that those who were in Tahrir learn from their own mistakes, because it was a number of missteps, and miscalculations, and everyone was, you know, had a part to blame in how things ended this way from the political parties, to the institutions, to the international community, to even the young activists who were on the forefront of this movement.”

“I hope that whoever comes next will be more critical, more modest, more grounded, and, you know, find new ways to achieve the same dreams because they apply to every generation,” he continues. “And what people wanted back then is what people still want to this day. Now, dignity and bread and social equality are declining, but I do believe that it's what the people want. And I can only hope that I am alive for when that happens again.”

End Notes

For the full multimedia version of 18 days, please visit the website:
https://features.middleeastmonitor.com/egypt-anniversary/

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