

The Egyptian Revolution of January 25, 2011

Anupama Potluri

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1 Background

Nasser was one of the military officers involved in the revolution that overthrew the monarchy in 1952. The revolution of 1952 was an anti-feudal movement which established state-capitalism under Nasser. When Sadat came to power, it turned to more classical capitalist state with privatisation. Mubarak introduced the neo-liberal model of capitalism since the 1990s. The present movement is a response to the neo-liberal model of the capitalist system which existed without the political democracy to go with the 'free market'.

He was a promoter of Pan-Arab nationalism that led to many of the monarchies being toppled. Later, the war with Israel in 1967 which ended in defeat of the Arab armies dismantles Pan-Arab nationalism. In 1973, the OPEC nations withheld oil which led to the oil shock of 1970s that is said to have led to stagflation in the capitalist economy (?). Never was this to happen again as a weapon against western imperialism as all oil producing and Arab nations are tamed and/or brought under dictatorial rule which was beholden to American imperialism, bought off with bribes (read business, esp. military business) and/or the threat of war and sanctions nipping any dissent in the bud. As Kissinger called them, "our bastards" were installed in power across the region.

After 9/11, the Mubarak regime played a major role in aiding and abetting the U.S. counterterrorism policy on rendition and torture. In 2005, the BBC reported that both the United States and the United Kingdom sent terrorist suspects to Egypt for detention. In that report, Egypt's prime minister acknowledged that since 2001, the U.S. had transferred some 60-70 detainees to Egypt as part of the "war on terror." According to journalist Jane Mayer's investigative book "The Dark Side," the new Vice President, Suleiman, was the coordinator of the CIA's extraordinary rendition program during the Bush era.

2 Imposition of Neo-liberalism in Arab states and its consequences

Egypt began a series of reforms in the 1990's that stacked the deck against workers and farmers. The government sold off the large state enterprises. New owners had little incentive to keep people in jobs or jobs in Egypt. The government enacted new measures to protect large farmers, with peasant farmers left on their own.

When conservative Prime Minister, Ahmed Nafiz, took power in 2004, the situation became desperate. With the help of a new anti labor law, pressure

mounted on Egypt's industrial workers. The ETUF had little to offer in support and frequently overruled the votes to strike of local chapters....

The only people for whom Egyptian neoliberalism worked "by the book" were the most vulnerable members of society, and their experience with neoliberalism was not a pretty picture. Organised labor was fiercely suppressed. The public education and the health care systems were gutted by a combination of neglect and privatization. Much of the population suffered stagnant or falling wages relative to inflation. Official unemployment was estimated at approximately 9.4% last year (and much higher for the youth who spearheaded the January 25th Revolution), and about 20% of the population is said to live below a poverty line defined as \$2 per day per person.

For the wealthy, the rules were very different. Egypt did not so much shrink its public sector, as neoliberal doctrine would have it, as it reallocated public resources for the benefit of a small and already affluent elite. Privatization provided windfalls for politically well-connected individuals who could purchase state-owned assets for much less than their market value, or monopolise rents from such diverse sources as tourism and foreign aid. Huge proportions of the profits made by companies that supplied basic construction materials like steel and cement came from government contracts, a proportion of which in turn were related to aid from foreign governments. A lot of these benefited Mubarak's family and close associates of the family - Gamal and the interior minister and so on. These were the first to go as Mubarak started making concessions to the demands on the street.

3 The spark that lighted the conflagration

Triggered originally on December 17, 2010 by the suicide of a 26-year old university graduate, Mohamed Bouazizi, who had had his unauthorized fruit and vegetable stand confiscated in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia and who soaked himself with gasoline and lit a match.

Tunisia's official unemployment rate stands at 14 per cent. However youth unemployment for people between the ages of 15-24 is at least double that, and in some parts of the interior, as high as 50 per cent. Furthermore the main areas of job creation the tourism industry, textile manufacturing targeting the European market in 'free trade zones' and what is left of Tunisia's agricultural sector are producing low wage jobs. And as in response to IMF/World Bank pressures, government subsidies continue to be reduced or eliminated from food and gasoline, even those with jobs find themselves having difficulty making ends meet.

The protests were called by the youth initially and as time went on, all sectors of Tunisian society - lawyers, artists, workers - joined the fight. There are some really uncanny parallels between what happened in Tunisia and a few days later in Egypt. There is initially a brutal crackdown on the protestors with promises of reform to improve economic conditions. When this fails, the army is probably ordered to act against the protestors but the army protects the people. This leads to emboldening of protestors which leads to Ben Ali (and later Mubarak) to make more promises. However, people are aware that if they back down now, they will be tracked, arrested, tortured, tried in military or other councils and hanged. They realise there is no going back. Three years ago, when a six-month

long protest over unemployment and social decay in Tunisia's mining district around Gafsa erupted, Ben Ali pursued a similar approach - repression and the promise of jobs. Virtually no economic development followed.

4 Background of various on-the-ground political struggles of Egyptians

4.1 Workers' Movements

"In the sprawling factories of El-Mahalla el-Kubra, a gritty, industrial town a few hours' drive north of Cairo, lies what many say is the heart of the Egyptian revolution. "This is our Sidi Bouzid," says Muhammad Marai, a labor activist, referring to the town in Tunisia where a frustrated street vendor set himself on fire, sparking the revolution there.

Indeed, the roots of the mass uprising that swept dictator Hosni Mubarak from power lie in the central role this dust-swept company town played years ago in sparking workers' strikes and grassroots movements countrywide. And it is the symbolic core of the latest shift in the revolution: a wave of strikes meant to tackle social and economic inequities, which has brought parts of Egypt to a standstill.

More than 24,000 workers at dozens of state-owned and private textile mills, in particular the mammoth Egypt Spinning and Weaving plant, went on strike and occupied factories for six days in 2006, winning a pay raise and some health benefits. Similar actions took place in 2007....

The same labor movement that staged the 2006 strike and a follow up in 2007, called for a national strike on April 6, 2008 to raise the nation's minimum wage and protest high food prices. Mubarak's government sent in police who took over the factory in hopes of preventing the strike. Conflict broke out with violence on the part of police toward the union members calling for the strike. Police arrested workers. Trials, convictions and prison sentences followed quickly. Other members continued to protest.

An Egyptian writer noted, "In the 6 April uprising, the demands of the workers and the general population overlapped. People called for lower food prices as workers called for a minimum wage."

In addition, the April 6 Youth Movement was born in this context and emerged as a key player advancing the aims of the national strike. This is the same organization that has been central to rallying crowds throughout the country for January 25 revolution." ("Forces Behind the Egyptian Revolution", Michael Collins, The Economic Populist)

"After Mahalla in 2008, the first weaknesses in the regime appeared," says Gamal Eid of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information. "Nothing was the same in Egypt after that." ("Egypt's Cauldron of Revolt", Anand Gopal, Foreign Policy)

4.2 Solidarity with Gaza

Israel's blockade of and attack on Gaza left 1300 Palestinians dead, a majority of them children, in Dec. 2008. Mubarak responded to this attack by complying with Israel's request to block the tunnels from Gaza to Egypt and hem them in

as Israel pounded Gaza. Egyptians who showed solidarity with Gaza through their protests on the street and/or the virtual world through their blogs were all targeted and some of them 'disappeared'. This was one of the issues that the Egyptians felt deeply about and were horrified at their govt's response which was so removed from the public sentiments.

4.3 Birth of April 6th Youth Movement

Israa Abd el-Fattah, was arrested in April 2008, because of her role in placing a page on Facebook encouraging Egyptians to support a strike in the industrial city of al-Mahalla that had taken place on April 6. On that day, the 'April 6 Youth movement was created. For the next two and a half years it maintained its presence and created one of the most popular political forums on several social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr.

When the president of Tunisia, Zein al-Abideen Ben Ali, was deposed on January 14, following a four week popular uprising, the April 6 movement, like millions of youth across the Arab World, was inspired, energized, and called for action. They called for marches to start from all major squares, mosques and churches in Cairo and Alexandria while asking others to help plan in other Egyptian cities. They insisted that the protests would be peaceful and that no one should bring weapons of any type.

They had four demands: that the government develops programs to address poverty and unemployment; that it would end the state of emergency and uphold judicial independence; the resignation of the interior minister whose ministry was notorious for torture and abuse of human rights; and for political reforms including the limitation of presidential terms to two, the dissolution of the parliament, and for new elections to be held after the massive elections fraud of last November. Within a few days, over ninety thousand youth signed up and charted a comprehensive protest throughout Egypt.

4.4 Role of Women

Many of the leaders of this movement were women - including Asma Mahfouz whose youtube video energized the young and Israa - both from April 6 movement. Many feminists including Nawal Sadaawi were there in Tahrir square. April 6 women lived in Tahrir in a safe environment unlike the daily harassment on the streets of Cairo. Spaces were reclaimed by women as part of this movement. On the other hand, once the main demands were met, the military has refused to even ack. the role of women by failing to appoint even a single woman nor youth member for the new consitutional amendment committee. Sadaawi has condemned this in the strongest terms and a new Egyptian Women's Union has been formed to fight the battles for women.

4.5 Contradictions in Muslim Brotherhood

There are elements of Brotherhood who are the entrepreneurs tolerated by Mubarak regime who were the people who participated in the talks with Suleiman. On the other hand, the youth and women's wings of Brotherhood rejected the alliance of the older more conservative members to join April 6 and other NGO movements in the protests. This forced the Brotherhood leadership to express

solidarity and join in. At the same time, the Mubarak govt. stole the Islamic discourse of Brotherhood into its own regime (much like the Congress did with BJP's saffron discourse?!).

4.6 Movement against Police Brutality

IMF and World Bank enthusiastically encouraged micro-credit loans to encourage entrepreneurship, esp. amongst youth and women. However, since these marginalized groups have no collateral, if they failed in their repayment, the police brutalized them with violence and sexualized violence. Thus, Khaled Said was brutally beaten up and murdered by the police. This coalesced the huge anti-brutality anti-police movement into a strong one which became one of the forces in the protests.

4.7 Open Questions

While Muslim Brotherhood was born in Egypt, suppressed by Nasser and came back in Mubarak's time, what are the factors that has made it not totally Wahabbi type of system? i.e., they do not believe in imposing Sharia rule (at least as of now) in Egypt. They are banned but tolerated, coopted by Mubarak to an extent. On the other hand, the youth wing of the Brotherhood joined the youth movements that called for the protests. This, despite their leadership stating they would not join the protests initially. It was only when the truly popular nature of the protest was seen that the Brotherhood and other parties such as El Baradei's party joined in along with their leaderships. So what are the conditions in Egypt which made the Brotherhood of a more secular nature and/or lets them collaborate with the secular forces? The youth wing seems to be diverging a lot from the older leadership and radicalising the party.

Why is it that the protests were born out of conditions of oppression created by the neo-liberal policies but take the form of a political revolution articulating political reformation more than economic reformation? It seems to me that political reformation is a platform most or almost all Egyptians can agree upon. When it comes to economic reformation, the middle classes and the privileged classes that participated including the Google Executive, cell phone owner etc. will certainly not be on the same side as the workers or the unemployed youth. On the other hand, lack of political space to protest and a democratic polity through which change can be pursued (at least theoretically if not in practice) becomes the rallying cry. It always occurred to me during the revolution that while there was a definite cry of "Regime Change" (not imposed by USA but a home-grown attempt), the final rallying cry seemed to be the departure of Mubarak. Soon after, people like Ghonim met the military and said they trusted them, urged people to return to work and themselves disappeared from the picture.

5 What does the future hold

The revolution in Egypt had demands that lead to far-reaching changes in the set up of society. The trade unions are now radicalized as seen from the Center for Trade Unions manifesto:

“....300 young persons have paid with their lives as a price for our freedom and to free us from the humiliation of slavery that we suffer from. And now the road, the path is open for all of us....

Freedom is not just the demand of youth onlywe want freedom so that we can express our demands and rights so we can find a way to monitor the wealth of our country, the result of our hard work that is being stolen and so we can re-distribute with some sense of justice so that different sectors of society who have been oppressed can get more of what it is owed to them so they don't have to needlessly suffer from hunger and illness.”

However, there will be every attempt by the old regime to stabilise and consolidate itself. The high-ranking military officials have all benefited largely and hugely from the neo-liberal regime. They are not going to give up their privileges without a fight.

The chapters in “The Shock Doctrine” by Naomi Klein on Poland, Russia, and South Africa make interesting reading in the context of Egypt's revolution. In each case when governments (communist or apartheid) collapsed, “technocrats” were brought in to help run countries that were suddenly without functional governments, and create the institutional infrastructure for their successors. The technocrats always seemed to have dispensed a form of what Klein calls “shock therapy” the imposition of sweeping privatization programs before dazed populations could consider their options and potentially vote for less ideologically pure options that are in their own interests. One of the things that make the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions potentially important on a global scale is that they took place in states that were already neoliberalised. The complete failure of neoliberalism to deliver “human well-being” to a large majority of Egyptians was one of the prime causes of the revolution, at least in the sense of helping to prime millions of people who were not connected to social media to enter the streets on the side of the pro-democracy activists.

There are some parallels to Argentina of December 2001(?). Argentinians protested against the stagnating economy and the severe crisis in lives created due to the neoliberal economics imposed since 1991. In a space of a month, they forced out 4(?) presidents before finally Nestor Kirchner took over. He was more progressive refusing to pay back some of the IMF owed debt and brought more regulation into the markets turning around the Argentinian economy to an extent.

Without any question, the events shaking the West Asian nations are a turning point in those nations' histories. People have lost their sense of fear. They have been politicised to an extent that there is no real going back to being apathetic subjects of autocratic regimes. This is especially true of youth who have seen the power of collective action and have tasted success - even if temporary or partial. These revolutions will also have unforeseen consequences on the events to unfold in the rest of the world, especially the Arab world. As the Tunisian revolution unfolded and Egyptians grabbed the attention of the world, Algerians, Yemenis, Bahrainians, Jordanians, even Saudi Arabians protested in small and big numbers. Libya has degenerated into a civil war with no one sure of what the eventual result is likely to be but Qaddafi and his family are seriously weakened as never before. Bahrainians are having to deal with the Arab armies sent in to crush the revolution - very important for USA as their major Navy 5th fleet is headquartered in Bahrain. All the monarchs/dictators have announced sops, promised lifting emergency laws, not to continue in office after the term

is over, transition to constitutional monarchy and so on in response to peoples' demands and in an attempt to cool the erupting masses.

The hope is that people realise that the old regimes will continue to betray them in spite of whatever promises given, and unless they remain vigilant against the subversion of the revolutions by the military and elites they are likely to lose the war though they have won the battles. It is important to achieve real changes but the military and USA will never allow a transition to true democracy as it will go against everything that USA stands for today. I guess we need more Wikileaks on what the US has actually done in Egypt in terms of achieving the transition currently in place. The Egyptian military has already started violent strikes against the protesting workers, the occupiers of Tahrir square while making enough concessions to keep the middle classes quiet. The battle will be a long one and it is important to retain the stamina for the long haul. How this can be done, will this be achieved, how badly will the movements be fractured, how much violence will the different states dare to use or will be able to use - the answers to all such questions will decide the short-term fates of these nations. The long-term fate is more well-known I guess - never have dictators survived forever in history!

6 In Conclusion

Every revolution is different, as unique as the aspirations of the people involved. Rosa Luxemburg realized this when she said:

“The modern working class does not carry out its struggle according to a plan set out in some book or theory; the modern workers' struggle is a part of history, a part of social progress, and in the middle of history, in the middle of progress, in the middle of the fight, we learn how we must fight... That's exactly what is laudable about it, that's exactly why this colossal piece of culture, within the modern workers' movement, is epoch-defining: that the great masses of the working people first forge from their own consciousness, from their own belief, and even from their own understanding the weapons of their own liberation.”