

## EGYPT

## OVERVIEW

#Jan25. #Tahrir. #KhaledSaid. These social networking hashtags are all shorthand for the most astonishing of all the uprisings of the Arab Spring of 2011: the Egyptian revolution. Egypt, with 81 million people the largest Arab country, had spent thirty long years in the iron grip of President Hosni Mubarak, a former air force officer with a notorious gift for winning elections with 90 percent of the vote. Mubarak had all the makings of a man who was destined to occupy the presidency right until his natural demise, at which point he would probably be able to pass power to a son.

He had it all. A dangerous domestic intelligence network could nip any opposition in the bud. An emergency law in place almost nonstop for forty-four years allowed his regime to abrogate the niceties of the constitution and any civil rights it pleased. And he had the friendship of the United States, which he strengthened by sticking mostly to the superpower's side in regional affairs and by appointing himself the chief prosecutor of the Muslim Brotherhood, an outlawed group that Washington saw as a latent force for extremism and terrorism.

There were signs of stress, surely. Egypt has long been a tumultuous country, famously enduring colonization, multiple revolutions,



Wars with Israel and Britain, and the assassination of President Anwar Sadat in 1981. In recent years, there were even regular public protests against the government's corruption, rigged elections, and many abuses. But by brutally silencing the most dangerous and the least powerful activists, the regime largely managed to sideline opposition. Activism and civil society were niche pursuits, sometimes even giving Mubarak something to point to as evidence that Egypt was making efforts to open up.

In the late 2000s, though, protests organized by civil society took on a new urgency. Mubarak was growing old; the transfer of power more imminent. The breaking point, probably—though it was not immediately apparent—was the protest movement that emerged following the death of a twenty-eight-year-old Alexandria man, Khaled Said, who was beaten to death by police in June 2010. It was hardly the first time that an Egyptian youth had been killed by police in opaque circumstances for uncertain crimes. But some things had changed by 2010. Most importantly, perhaps, was that Egypt and especially the youth were wired. Said's gruesome post-mortem photos made the rounds on social networking sites, on smart phones, and in Internet cafes. This time, the killing was no rumor or the private tragedy of a small community or family. It was documented, and every Egyptian knew about it. Facebook and Twitter activism rallied around Said, often promoted by Egyptians who could now protest without having to reveal their identities. (Some turned out to be quite well connected—the most famous Facebook page, "We are all Khaled Said," was administered by Wael Ghonim, an Egyptian marketing executive for Google.)

It was in the midst of this that Tunisia erupted, and showed the Egyptian protesters—and many who had silently approved but shied away from joining in—that mass nonviolent action could displace even the most entrenched systems of power. With nimble and impressive organizing, activists rallied hundreds of thousands of people to Cairo's aptly named Tahrir ("Liberty") Square on January 25, 2011. Satellite television was there to document it



all, and the protests kept growing. The movement was remarkably peaceful, though there were clashes with police and Mubarak supporters who tried to turn things violent—and more than eight hundred people did die. These martyrs, as they were called, only increased the fervor of the protesters. The weeks at Tahrir united a remarkable array of leftists, Islamists, Christians, and the politically unaffiliated, groups that many observers had predicted would never work together. Only eighteen days after the protests began, on February 11, 2011, Hosni Mubarak was forced to step down, and the Egyptian military—a respected institution in the country, at least up until that time—took power.

But the revolution was far from over. Throughout the year, resentment grew toward the military leadership, especially the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), and among the most ardent activists, who had expected much more than trading a dictator for a military state. More large demonstrations erupted in November before the first elections scheduled after Mubarak's fall. Meanwhile, insecurity became a troubling issue—the large minority of Copts felt particularly vulnerable and even targeted for violence. At press time, the elections had been completed relatively free of incidents, with Islamists doing particularly well, but their impact and legitimacy were still somewhat murky.

It seemed that getting rid of Mubarak may have actually been the easy part. But having achieved the unthinkable, and finally tasting freedom, Egyptians justifiably wanted more.



## FROM PARTIER TO PROTESTER: THE BIRTH OF A SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

*Jawad Nabulsi*

*Jawad Nabulsi, twenty-nine, was one of the main figures in the January protests in Tahrir Square that led to the downfall of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Raised in an upper-class family in Cairo, he was educated in Canada and returned home in 2006 to found a network of NGOs (non-governmental organizations) called the Renaissance Council. His work raising funds for poor areas further politicized him, and, using the vast network he had created, Nabulsi went on to help publicize the protests of 2011. Nabulsi, an entrepreneur and partner in different ventures, restaurants, mobile Web sites, and a business incubator, is often referred to as "the pirate" because he wears an eye patch after losing an eye from a police shot on January 28, 2011. He is still involved in the Egyptian youth movement.*

**G**rowing up in Egypt, I saw the huge gap that exists between the upper class and the lower class. The middle class in Egypt does not exist; life here is very unfair, and economic injustice seems to be inevitable. My family and I live a privileged life in Egypt, and that made me sympathize with the lower class and understand that the gap between rich and poor needs to be bridged here. We have all noticed the injustice. My great-grandfather originally came



from Nablus to Egypt in 1921 and founded a soap factory, which today is still very large. My grandfather was a doctor who studied in Switzerland—something quite rare at the time—and my parents owned an antique business and a restaurant. I lived well; I went to the American school, which was expensive, and we belonged to the exclusive Gezira Club and Heliopolis Club.

People like us had certain opportunities. It was very unfair. When I got my driving license, for example, I didn't do any tests. I just got it. Anything that had to do with the government, people like us had connections so it just got done. Whatever paperwork there was, you'd talk to who you knew in the government or the police and it would be taken care of. Lower-class people had no such opportunities, but I always thought that was how life should be. I was really a bad boy. I got expelled from three schools. I was always having fun and partying. I was a troublemaker. But when I turned seventeen, I wanted a change, so I chose a university in Canada where I could go and make a fresh new start.

I read about Acadia University in Nova Scotia, and since it was the most expensive, I assumed it was the best. I went there in 1999 to study business. There weren't a lot of Arabs or Muslims at Acadia, so people asked me a lot of questions about Middle East politics and the religion of Islam. Before coming to Canada, I hadn't thought much about politics, so I didn't know how to answer all the questions, and that upset me. I began reading and thinking, and found that Canada was a totally different world. In Egypt we thought Palestinians had the right to land, but in Canada people thought the opposite, that it was the Palestinians who were the aggressors. I started reading and learning about the Middle East. I read Norman Finkelstein, Israel Shahak, Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, and Ahmed Dajani. I had never met a Jew before, and I thought they were all murderers, but I learned there was a difference between Zionists and Jews. I started an Arabic students association, and there were Jews who joined because they were against the Israeli occupation in Palestine. I began lecturing



every Friday, and more and more people came. Talking about these topics helped me learn about them.

Then September 11th happened, and I began talking to so many people on campus. I'd drop into classes I wasn't enrolled in, and when 9/11 came up, I would jump into the discussion. I'd explain that all Muslims are not terrorists and neither are the Palestinians. I was exposed to so many ideas, especially when I began volunteering for Canadian election campaigns. In 2003, I worked on Peter McKay's campaign for leadership of the Progressive Conservative Party. (He now serves as Canada's Minister of National Defence.) I met Prime Minister Steven Harper. I helped the New Democratic Party. I had no agenda. I just wanted to learn and talk to people about the Arab situation.

I kept looking at Egypt and thinking, "Why do we have a president who has been there for thirty years, and I can see there is no chance for me to be in power? In all of the Arab world, what is the chance of this happening? I can see almost none." In Egypt, you had to abide by the ideologies of those in power and accept a certain level of corruption. In Canada it was different. Being an Arab, I was occasionally harassed and beaten up, but the police and so many people were sympathetic to me even though they were white and Christian. The people who beat me up were fined and put on academic probation. It was an eye opener. I realized I couldn't generalize about people. I learned not to judge anyone until I had seen them up close. You can't always trust what you read in the newspaper. You have to get information yourself.

Talking about democracy is one thing. Seeing it in action is something else. People said to me, "The Middle East has poverty and corruption," and I thought, "Look at all the prophets from our part of the world. We can't be that bad. Jesus, Moses, and Muhammed came from our part of the world so we can't be that bad." I formed a foundation called Lifemakers Canada, and we had a campaign around the world to send used clothes to Darfur and Palestine. I organized groups all over Canada, and we



filled 10 forty-foot containers of clothing—cleaned, folded, and packed. But I realized at the end of the day that if I wanted to reach people, it would not be in Canada but in my own country. Life is already pleasant in Canada. They did not need my help. The challenge was to come back, use what I had learned, and bring it to Egypt.

In 2006, I came back to Egypt and met with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in different fields. I formed a council of NGOs called the Renaissance Council, and we held weekly coordination meetings. I began working in Upper Egypt and saw that the quality of services there was totally different. It just was not fair. Salaries were about E£70 to E£80 a month, or \$15 to \$20, and there was no water or electricity in the houses. It was like these villages were in the Stone Age. It wasn't right. We raised money and used it to pay the water and electricity company to connect these villagers to water and electricity, but then the government began privatizing, and the cost of connecting homes doubled. I was outraged. The people were so poor. I can't describe how callous this price increase was. I felt it was extremely unjust. But we started getting a better idea of what the needs were and what had to be done. I also started an environmental awareness group called Keep Egypt Clean, which now has more than a hundred thousand members. We all kept in touch on Facebook, and I developed a huge network.

I had gone to villages and slums, had seen the depth of problems in these places, and assumed they could not be fixed. I'd tell myself, "They are too humongous. It's like throwing something in the sea." Then I read *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell and understood you don't need to change the whole population. You just need a few people. I realized I needed to bring together a circle of key players who could have an influence. I also read *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't* by Jim Collins. It reinforced the idea that it's not about the people in the company; it's about the *right* people in the company. I didn't



need to change everything, I just needed to focus on the leaders in the community and work with them.

Around this time, so many things happened. In 2008, my brother, who was religious but not political, was picked up by the police and tortured. It was just dumb luck that I wasn't home at 3 A.M. when the police broke down the door, or I would have been arrested too. They detained him under the emergency laws, so they could keep him for forty days without a trial before he had to be released.

All across Egypt, you could feel that people were ready for a change. Everyone knew someone who had been arrested or had had to pay a bribe—even relatives of the police. I'd take a taxi or a bus, and everyone was talking about how fed up they were, how things had to change. I remember meeting a soldier who had been standing for twelve hours on the street in case the president's car passed by. He was so angry. How could Mubarak think people would defend him? This *was* the tipping point. Everyone felt the same way about the police and the government, and when they got on Facebook, they found other people to listen to them. They got information, and they could make their own decisions. The balance tipped. Going down to protest became acceptable. Before then, people like members of my family would have said, "No way, how could you protest? It is not something people like us do." Then it became normal to protest. It became something we *could* do.

Right after Tunisia, the call for protests in Egypt had started. We didn't know we could collapse the regime, but we knew something good would happen. I was sitting with someone close to the regime, and I told him, "This time it's different. You will see."

When we started organizing for the January 25 "Day of Anger," we knew something big would happen, something unprecedented, but we never thought the president would go to jail. We didn't think. We just went down to the streets and called others to join us. People just kept coming, and the crowd got bigger and bigger



until we saw there was no turning back. Going to Tahrir Square was a risk, and there was no way we could come back.

I was not an organizer. I was a lobbyist. There were so many people in different groups and with different backgrounds, and they called online for us to protest. Because I already knew a lot of people, I just spread the word to different leftist organizations and groups against the police brutality. I told people we would meet at the Mustapha Mahmoud Mohandessein 29th mosque. We saw soldiers who didn't know why we were there, and we wanted to get their support, so I hugged them and told them, "We are doing this for you. We need justice." It was so emotional. We were hugging and crying.

Walking around Tahrir Square, we saw most people were not like us. They were not educated or informed, and a lot of them tried to disrupt things. Some even tried to steal. But we had enough of a tipping point to prevent any fighting or harming anyone, and that made our protest peaceful. If we saw anyone trying to break anything, we would tell them to stop. We saw abandoned police cars, and there were policeman nearby. People wanted to kill them. To prevent this from happening, I went up to the officers and encouraged them to take off their uniforms and run away.

There were women and young children in the square. Without women, this protest would not have been possible. I saw a lady with tear gas in her eyes, and she would not stop marching. I saw women getting shot with rubber bullets, and they would continue. The women were amazing. If there is to be a renaissance in this part of the world, it will be from women, not men. The women will lead.

On January 28, between 11 P.M. and midnight, I got shot several times, and a bullet went into my eye. It took me twelve hours to get treatment; I could barely walk, and I was passing out. My friends held onto me and protected me. The police and the army were still in the square, and it was so dangerous to be there, especially in my condition.



I was moved from hospital to hospital on the back of someone's motor bike. Moving around the city, I met different protesters who didn't have money, and I took their names and numbers. A few days later, when I was released from the hospital, I set up a call center to take information about people who were wounded or missing. I announced the number on my Web site so people could call and volunteer to help. I also reached out to TV channels, asking them to broadcast the number so people could call in. Still weak from my injuries, I printed thousands of leaflets with the URL of the Web site and passed them around at Tahrir Square.

There was so much going on during that time. President Mubarak made a mistake. He gave an emotional speech against the revolution, saying he was old and would give up power at the end of the year. His supporters and the police hired thugs, and they went to Tahrir Square and tried to kick the people out. I could see members of the secret police everywhere. But their violence made people sympathetic to us. Mubarak's supporters just didn't get it. It's the same thing going on again right now. The violence won people over to our side. The silent majority started to sympathize with the protesters in Tahrir Square, and this is when you win. You just have to stand long enough so that the silent majority is on your side. But if you don't win the silent majority, there won't be a tipping point. You won't effect change. The people sympathized with us, and the army knew there was no way they could be violent against us, so Mubarak stepped down. Then there was a celebration, and the anger and frustration in the streets transformed into jubilation.

When you say something for so long and it actually happens, it's weird. It gives you so much confidence. The Egyptian people are in a totally different place now because of this confidence. We feel that if we can do something as momentous as eliminating the regime, we can eliminate poverty and illiteracy. There is a huge gap between us and the older generation because we saw the revolution



happen. The Internet exposed us to so many ideas so we could make our own analysis and our own decisions.

Things are going to work out. It's a process. The regime is still there, but the time has come for change. No one is untouchable. Everyone can make mistakes, and everyone has to be accountable. Anyone who thinks he is in his position because of his brain or his power or his money is in for a rude awakening. This arrogance will be broken down. It's about justice.