

Introduction

Deadly clashes between protesters and police had been raging on Muhammad Mahmud Street off of Tahrir Square for nearly four straight days as I made my way to the vicinity, which I had done daily since the battle first erupted. It was Tuesday, November 22, 2011, and activists had called for mass protests nationwide to force the generals of the Security Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) who had been ruling Egypt since the fall of President Hosni Mubarak to relinquish power immediately to a civilian transitional government. Dubbed the “Second Revolution,” the demonstrations were the largest Egypt had seen since the president stepped down earlier that year on February 11 and exposed SCAF’s vulnerability and failures at governing. The activists hoped to press the advantage the new November uprising had given them to wrest control of the country from the generals and set it back on track toward their revolutionary goals. I was eager to return to Tahrir to find out the latest developments and learn how the revolutionaries were organizing themselves and their new sit-in to capitalize on this unexpected and hopeful political opening.

After disembarking at Sadat Metro station, I emerged from the dimly fluorescent-lit underground tunnels through the exit near Qasr al-Nil Bridge to find Tahrir basking in the glow of the last bit of sunlight before dusk. In the distance, near Hardee’s and Pizza Hut, a thick cloud of tear gas and black smoke hovered over the street where mostly poor, young men hurled their righteous fury at bullet-firing police in the form of stones, molotov cocktails, homemade bombs, and the fuming tear-gas canisters also shot at them by police. A swarm of spectators had convened to spur them on from behind. The rest of the square was jostling with the thousands of Egyptians who had turned out to show their solidarity—many of them provoked by the footage that had just surfaced of soldiers coldly dragging the dead bodies of protestors across the

concrete and piling them on mounds of trash—but also to enjoy the convivial, street-fair atmosphere typical of Tahrir protests. Most incongruous was the cotton-candy man, whose enormous pink cloud of spun sugar floating over the sea of demonstrators offset the intensity of the smoke-filled scene with a bit of whimsy. Ambulances and volunteer motorcyclists transporting the scores of injured from the field clinics to the hospital rushed in and out of the precinct (a total of fifty-one killed and three thousand injured during the Muhammad Mahmud street clashes meant this was the worst incident of state violence against protesters since the eighteen-day uprising).¹ Meanwhile, wailing sirens and explosions near the protesters sporadically ripped through the murmur of conversation, battle racket, and revolutionary chants against the army—“*al-sha ‘b yurid i ‘dam al-mushir!*” (The people want the execution of the general!)—was just one of the refrains the more militant protesters shouted during this latest revolutionary upsurge. Near the center of the square, an effigy of Defense Minister General Muhammed Husayn Tantawi dangled by the neck from a high lamppost, illustrating what they meant.

What stood out to me the most that day was not the conflicting elements of the scene—by then I had grown accustomed to Tahrir’s discordant violence and ebullience. Rather, what caught my eye was a giant, white banner that was newly raised in this seemingly ever-morphing square. Unlike the usual banners that articulated the revolutionaries’ demands for the state elite and greater public beyond Tahrir, this one addressed the protesters onsite. In large Arabic letters, it read,

¹ “The State of the World’s Human Rights,” Amnesty International Report 2012, 136.

Rules of the Square

It is absolutely prohibited to establish any independent stage in the square.

It is absolutely prohibited to raise any slogans pertaining to any particular political party or movement.

The square has one microphone. No other is permitted.

One voice . . .

One battle fought by us all under the slogan:

“Sovereignty for the Egyptian people!”

We are all Egyptians!

The sign was oddly captivating. The voice behind the text was crisp; it spoke rightfully and authoritatively but also anonymously. It was as if its creators were trying to incite “the people” to take ownership of these rules as though they had written them, to stir their consciousness as a unified, revolutionary, collective actor. To me, this nondescript sign evoked the behind-the-scenes struggle of Egypt’s leading revolutionaries to impose order and organization on the movement and give it direction without stepping to its forefront as leaders. In many ways, the artifact spoke to the paradoxical story of the simultaneous presence and absence of leadership in the Egyptian revolution that had fascinated me since the revolutionary movement first erupted.’ It might not have been clear to the average protester where this sign had come from, but I had some idea. It had all the markings of the youth activists I had been following for my fieldwork, the leaders of this leaderless revolution.

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The story of how this movement first erupted is familiar to many by now. On January 25, 2011, the people of Egypt burst onto the stage of history and improvised a spectacular eighteen-day drama in revolutionary resistance that captured the imagination of audiences around the world. The rage that drove them was fueled by at least a decade's worth of crushing poverty, government neglect, political repression, police brutality, rampant corruption, and an enduring foreign policy subservient to US imperial interests and impervious to their own. Armed with nothing but their grievances and the righteousness of their cause, Egyptians of every stripe shook off their fear and joined hardened activists in the streets and city squares to challenge the people and system that oppressed them. Their resistance culminated in the spectacular fall of Mubarak, the man who ruled them for thirty years like a pharaoh, hastening what felt like an irreversible turn toward a new era of openness, accountability, opportunity, and political freedom. Excluded, demoralized, voiceless for decades, Egyptians unleashed a wave of hope with their revolutionary upheaval that ripped across the region and renewed faith in the power of the people for believers and skeptics alike, from East to West, quickly becoming global heroes.

In the wake of this extraordinary event, one nagging question occupied observers of Middle East politics: how did this happen? How did a people berated for their apathy and stereotyped as politically backward and unready for democracy suddenly come together in one of the most astonishing revolutionary mobilizations of our time and manage to evict their deeply entrenched leader in less than three weeks?

There is no single answer to this question. Revolutions are, after all, complex processes that lend themselves to many readings, and Egypt's revolutionary movement has been no exception. Early attempts to explain the sudden outburst celebrated it as a spontaneous expression of popular frustration that was facilitated by technology such as the Internet, especially social media ventures like Facebook and Twitter. They also cited the significance of its leaderless nature, noting the remarkable absence of a single galvanizing charismatic leader—think Lenin, Mao, Castro—or a vanguard organization at its helm as has been the case in most revolutionary movements. On the other hand, the role of “youth” as a collective that ignited and spurred this movement has been duly noted. However, discussions about young people's role have been problematic for several reasons. First, their story has often been limited to how they used Internet tools to organize. Second, discussions about youth have mostly referenced them as a homogenous category, overlooking significant structural differences that have historically separated them, such as class, gender, and religion, in addition to other factors that might have shaped their trajectory into politics and their organizing activities during the movement. Third, they have offered little insight into how individual youth leaders—the actors in real time and space—organized for the January 25 uprising and attempted to sustain it the following eighteen days and ensuing transitional period.²

²For exceptions, see Ilan Baron and Jeroen Gunning's *Why Occupy a Square? People, Protests and Movement in the Egyptian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) and Anne Rennick's *Politics and Revolution in Egypt: Rise and Fall of Youth Activists* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018)

This book's reading of the revolution, then, focuses on its youthful leadership. I examine the unfolding of the revolutionary process from the perspective of the young, organized activists who were some of its main drivers. As I illustrate in this book, this process does not begin on January 25 but stretches back much further, deep into the lives of these activists and the history of their country. Specifically, I focus on those activists based in Cairo who played an instrumental role in instigating January 25 and would become the leaders of the Revolutionary Youth Coalition (RYC). The RYC was the first revolutionary entity to announce itself from Tahrir Square during the early eighteen-day uprising and functioned as one of its main nerve centers. It was comprised of the political youth groups that had been the most active before January 25 and whose collaboration had begun long before the revolt. Together, they reflected the diverse political ideologies that existed in Tahrir. In telling the story of these young protagonists, I complicate the discussion on leadership and leaderlessness in Egypt's revolutionary process. In keeping with Antonio Gramsci's contention that there is no such thing as a truly spontaneous movement,³ I argue that the existence of the RYC and the organizing its members undertook before and during the eighteen-day uprising demonstrates that the uprising was not entirely spontaneous, leaderless, or rooted in social media, but led by young activists with a history of political engagement pre-dating the revolution.

I have chosen to emphasize the narratives of ten RYC leaders who reflect the diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, ideological leanings, personal histories, and subjective transformations of the youth activists who participated in this movement. I trace the trajectories

³ Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 196–97.

of these activists from when they first became politically conscious and active before the revolution up until about 2015, after they had endured nearly four years of intense revolutionary struggle against four different regimes: first Mubarak's, then the SCAF's, then the Muslim Brotherhood's, then the ascendent General Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi's. In the process, I reconstruct the stories and emergent revolutionary subjectivities of these youth leaders, taking into consideration questions of gender, class, religion, and ideology. What emerges is a nuanced portrait of revolutionary youth leadership that challenges the dominant media constructs circulated in the early days of the revolt. The RYC leaders I profile in this book differ from those who appeared frequently in international news media outlets during the initial uprising. Mostly secular, upper-class cosmopolitan youth who garnered fame outside of Egypt for their English updates on Twitter, very few of these latter activists appeared to have acted in a visible leadership capacity on the ground as organizers before or during the revolution. The RYC activists differ in this respect, and in that many of them identified as members of the subaltern communities whose grievances were the main thrust behind the revolt. Through the experiences of this cohort and an understanding of their motives, hopes, visions, and struggles, we can access the many of the forces that shaped the emergence of Egypt's revolutionary movement and get a sense of the people and the political ideas that will continue to compete for the country's future.

What that future will look like has always been unclear, but as of this writing, it appears far less fluid than it did during the heady days of the eighteen-day uprising. Back then, as Egypt's masses started to command more and more power and the long odds against them started to shift in their favor, the revolutionary movement's prospect for sweeping away the old order and ushering in the kind of radical social and political change the activists aspired to felt excitingly promising. But the story turned out quite differently. The unbridled optimism and

creative energy that animated revolutionaries during those triumphant days would melt into bitter disillusionment, despair, and even trauma as they watched the hard-won gains they had made toward a more open, free, and fair society disappear and the dictatorship they thought they had dealt a permanent death blow prevail. Indeed, if the question analysts were asking in 2011 was how this remarkable revolutionary struggle erupted, the question that would occupy them since 2013 is how the movement was so roundly defeated by the counterrevolution. This book addresses this question too. Understanding the challenges these youth leaders faced early on in trying to direct and sustain the revolution offers one explanation for why the movement unravelled. Most notably, as we will see, their decentralized and diffuse leadership structure had its advantages in the early days of the revolt but proved a liability later, as stronger organization was needed for the movement to assert its dominance and capture the state.