Withdrawal from Taḥrīr?

Voices from the social media on the fate of the revolution, the wall of fear, and the role of individual actors in post-coup Egypt

Abstract

This report presents results of a critical survey of how ‘revolutionary’ individuals in Egypt assessed the fate of the revolution and their own trajectory in it, a year after the military deposed president Mursī. Based on an analysis of social media and online interviews, it focuses on those who spearheaded the 2011 ‘revolution’ and who use the term ‘revolutionaries’ as self-description, in contrast to the other major forces: the Muslim Brothers (MB), the supporters of the old regime, and the military.

I argue that among long-standing activists, ‘withdrawal’ from public action was less pronounced than some would believe, and often understood as a tactical retreat to safeguard one’s forces from being crushed in the clash of the ‘old’ giants. Maintaining the ‘spirit of the revolution’ rather than exhausting oneself in useless street battles was the order of the day.

On the surface, the ‘deep state’ has managed to reassert itself, through cooption of the media and harsh repression of any opposition. Paradoxically, this shows how afraid the old regime is of the power of new ideas. It is thus all the more important for those who are not susceptible to direct persecution to support forums for alternative visions and free debate in Egypt. Outside actors such as Norway should

• help to keep open spaces—physical and virtual—for alternative information flows, like the ‘Tahrir Lounge’ supported by the German Foreign Ministry;

• monitor and publicly criticise attempts to restrict such spaces and hold Egyptian authorities accountable for such restrictions.

Introduction

This report presents results of a critical survey of how ‘revolutionary’ individuals in Egypt assessed the fate of the revolution and their own trajectory in it. It was researched in the summer of 2014 and is based primarily on material focusing on the anniversaries of the 25
January 2011 ‘revolution’ and of the military takeover of 3 July 2013. Reflecting sentiments and dynamics palpable on social media at that time, it is exclusively concerned with those forces that spearheaded the 2011 ‘revolution’ and that use the term ‘revolutionaries’ (al-thuwwār) as a self-description, contrasting this to the other major forces at play, principally the Muslim Brothers (al-Ikhwān), the supporters of the old regime (al-fulūl), and the military (al-ʿaskar). In line with this emic use, the word ‘revolution’, if unqualified, refers to the uprising that started on 25 January 2011.

After the intense polarisation of the Egyptian political scene culminated in the military takeover on 3 July 2013, the violent crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood in the subsequent months, cooption of the media to tow the state line, and increasing repression of any other open opposition, Egyptians who had embraced the 25 January revolution found themselves in a limbo regarding how to assess and react to this turn of events. Supporters of ousted president Mursī and of the Muslim Brotherhood were trying to maintain an air of steadfastness (ṣāmidūn) in their “National Alliance to Support Legitimacy” (al-Taḥāluf al-ʿawāni li-Daʿāʾim al-Sharʿīyya), sticking to messages such as “against the coup” (didd al-inqilāb), “against you [Sīsī]” (diddak), or, in the run-up to the January 2014 constitutional referendum, “no to/boycott the military’s constitution” (lā li-qāṭiʿū dustūr al-ʿaskar). Among many others, however, a disillusionment close to depressed pessimism (tashāʿum) seemed to become the dominant mood. To wit, here is a tag cloud made from interviews conducted by Vivienne Matthies-Boon in early 2014 with Egyptian activists aged 18-35, in the course of a pilot study on the emotional effects of the political developments in Egypt.

---

1 To reflect usage in Egypt, I translate Ġamāʿat al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn (literally, the “Society of the Muslim Brothers”) as “Muslim Brotherhood” while usually referring to its members (al-Ikhwān) as “Muslim Brothers” or simply “the Brothers”. The abbreviation MB refers to both.
Many of these people had been opposing military rule under SCAF just as much as the Brotherhood’s attempt to appropriate the state. What had happened since summer 2013? The military removed Mursī from power – with massive popular support, including from many revolutionary activists themselves. Even the bloody crackdown on the Brotherhood enjoyed a good measure of endorsement from a population tired of the turmoil of a seemingly endless revolution. Secularists opposed to renewed military rule were squeezed between the ‘steadfast’ but largely unrepentant Brothers and their allies from part of the non-MB Islamist spectrum; a population fed up with perceived insecurity and with disruptions to traffic, the economy, and daily life in the name of ‘revolution’; an unreformed security apparatus; and a re-assertive ‘deep state’ and its legislation that all but outlawed public demonstrations and any political or cultural activity that could be interpreted as subverting the military’s supremacy. And soon, revolutionary activists found themselves on the receiving end of state repression along with the Muslim Brotherhood.

No wonder then that some of those who had engaged themselves in public in 2011-2013 now tended to withdraw. This withdrawal into perceived passiveness was something that both the Brotherhood and secular opponents of the military like the Revolutionary Socialists obviously regarded as dangerous and tried to fight. But how did individual participants assess developments, for themselves, from their particular perspectives, and how did they decide to react? For a single researcher, it is impossible to undertake a representative study, so what follows is an exploratory essay. It is based on reading into prominent social media accounts and on online interviews conducted with rank-and-file participants in the 2011 revolution, as well as their Facebook and Twitter feeds. The main focus is on reflections around the 2014 anniversary of 25 January (when ‘revolutionary’ demonstrators withdrew from Tahrîr Square.
to avoid confrontation with state security), and around the first anniversary of the military takeover.

Principle questions were:

- Does the withdrawal from ‘Tahrir’ (the Cairo square that became the paradigmatic symbol of street power) signify a withdrawal from public action altogether? Is it a withdrawal into the private sphere, leaving public affairs to the powers that be (as in the bourgeois ‘Biedermeier’ attitude during the age of the European Restoration 1815-48)? Or are we witnessing a readjustment, a new phase of ‘post-Tahrir’, becoming conscious of a longer and perhaps more realistic time frame (cf. the oft-quoted comparison to how long the French Revolution took)?

- How does withdrawal square with the ‘wall of fear’ said to have been broken in 2011—a feat that many had celebrated as the one irreversible effect of the 25 January revolution? How do post-revolutionary individuals position themselves vis-à-vis authorities—political, religious, family, etc.—after having claimed to have lost fear of them?

I shall argue that among long-standing activists, the ‘withdrawal’ from public action was less pronounced than some would believe, and often understood as a tactical retreat to safeguard one’s forces from being crushed in the clash of the ‘old’ giants. Maintaining the ‘spirit of the revolution’ rather than exhausting oneself in useless street battles was the order of the day. Using individual cases, in what follows I shall present a nuanced picture of how different individuals portrayed their own trajectory with the revolution and their own role in its future path.

2011: “I will keep the revolution alive”

To avoid oversimplification, it is important to recall that from the early days of the revolution, people had been concerned that it could be derailed and aborted, that the revolutionary forces would not be able to overcome the old system. Pessimism, however, was not the dominant mood back then. Rather, a defiant optimism (‘we shall prevail in the end’) was what many people expressed. “We have broken the wall of fear”, and “if things go wrong, we know the way back to Tahrir” were familiar phrases.

A 17-year old emphatically articulated this spirit on her blog in September 2011, in a post titled “The Revolution and Me”. For this young girl, there was no room for pessimism: the revolution cannot be aborted since it is carried in the hearts of a generation of young people who revolted against themselves before they revolted against the ruler. Because the revolution lives in the hearts and minds of this generation, it will stay alive as long as those who carry its spirit are alive; and if everyone else falls by the wayside, “I” will keep it alive for as long as I live, and that is “a feeling that we all share”:

“I was quite depressed and influenced by the line that the revolution will be aborted, but when I looked at myself I became sure that this will not happen because the revolution has happened within us (il-thawra ǧūwânâ ibnâ ḥāṣalit). We have revolted against ourselves before we revolted against the ruler (ibnâ

thūrnā ‘alā nafsinā qabl mā n’thūr ʿa’ll-ḥākim). Believe me, we are weary now because we have a hope that we worry about / care for (amal khāyfīn ‘alēh). Before, we were about to receive the finishing stroke. Life (il-rūḥ) has been given back to us after a long suffering: that’s why we are worried. Our worry now and our fear are a healthy symptom.”

“My parent’s idea about me has changed from what it was before the revolution. They must respect my wishes now […]. The revolution has changed our families and their ways of thinking about us. […]

Be confident!

The revolution is kept safely in our bosoms (il-thawra mahfūza fi sudūrnā) and will not be aborted. The revolution does not only live in the heart of a single leader so that it could be aborted if he loses hope. The revolution lives in the hearts of millions; if one million of them stop to believe in it, the other millions will steadily support it. We will continue to lean on this bit of worry and hope and love until we will reach the safe shore. There is no Sa’d Zaghlūl this time who could say it’s no use. 6 There is no leader whom they could torture and get to despair. The people (il-sha’b) are leading the revolution! And it is impossible that all the people despair at the same time. The revolution shall not die, unless we all wish it to die :)) And rest assured: if all of you would like it to die, I shall keep it alive, and it won’t die unless I die :). And rest even more assured, for we all carry this feeling inside us (wa iṭṭamminū [sic] law kullukum ḥabbētūhā t’mūt anā ha-fiḍal ahyīhā wa mish ha-t’mūṭ illā law mutt :) wa iṭṭamminū aktar li-inno kullinā ġuwwānā ‘l-iḥsās da’).

What became of this spirit?

What became of this spirit that me and my generation has overcome the wall of fear when the revolution stumbled? emy redwan last updated her blog in September 2012, and like her, others have fallen silent too.

Silence?

The most prominent example to choose silence was Wā’il Ghunaym (b. 1980), who in 2010 had founded the Facebook page Kullinā Khālid Saʿīd (http://fb.me/ElShaheeed) that played a leading role in the 2011 revolution. 7 Wā’il Ghunaym had supported anti-Mursī demonstrations but warned against those who were dreaming to restore the old regime. 8 Right after the military takeover, he stopped updating the Facebook page and shut up on Twitter. He broke his silence only once, to explain his decision:

“Since 3 July 2013 I have taken a decision to withdraw from the political scene, after two and a half years of intense and persistent efforts to push Egypt towards the future that I wish for it as one of the young people of this country who was not driven by any other interest than that of Egypt and its people and their right to live in a state that respects their rights and that advances to take its place among the developed countries. But unfortunately, after all my efforts have failed and my warnings and my advice

---

6 Sa’d Zaghlūl (1859-1927), Egyptian national leader and hero of the 1919 revolution that ended the British Protectorate. He was eventually forced to compromise with the colonial power, and feeling he was unable to resist further British pressure, he resigned as prime minister after only a few months in office. In Egyptian national memory, however, he continued to be regarded as the great leader of the revolution who helped to free Egypt from its colonial overlords. emy redwan’s comparison serves to emphasise that unlike 1919, the 2011 revolution will not remain incomplete.

7 His own (some will say: exaggerated) account is given in Wael Ghonim, Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People is Greater than the People in Power: A Memoir, Wilmington, MA, Mariner Books, 2012.

were thrown to the wind, I took the decision to withdraw so as not to be part of a sedition (fitna) where Egyptian blood is spilled and [human] rights are thrown overboard.”

But Wa’il Ghunaym’s withdrawal into silence cannot be regarded as typical; he has always been an outsider compared to more long-established activists like Wā’il ‘Abbās (b. 1974), ‘Alā’ ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ (b. 1981), Ḫūsām al-Ḥamalāwī (b. 1977), Nawāra Niğm (b. 1973), Wā’il Khalil (b. 1965), or Ḥamāl ʿĪd (b. 1964), to name only a few, all of whom have continued to voice their views publicly in one way or another.9

Abstention? Regret? Relief? Stubbornness?

Positions in the ‘non-silent’ camp were many and variegated, however, and it is not easy to categorise them. A former activist in the April 6 Youth Movement (anonymised here as ‘F’) observed that all Facebook posts on the first anniversary of the mass demonstrations against Mursī fell into one of three groups:

1. ‘I demonstrated against Mursī and regret to have participated in a crime.’
2. ‘I demonstrated for the legitimate president and want him back.’
3. ‘I celebrate the first anniversary of the end of MB rule.’

She continued stating that she herself was happy to fall into neither of these categories. Her conscience was clear; she demonstrated neither for nor against Mursī because it was evident since his first day in office that the two pro-revolution sides [the MB and the secularist revolutionaries] were on a confrontation course opening the way to the enemies of the revolution so they could abort it. The result was the return of the police state and of the old system, with thousands detained and thousands killed.

This was an oft-repeated analysis in 2012: the only concessions the military was forced to make happened when revolutionaries and MB stood united; when they were divided, the

---


10 Wā’il ‘Abbās is one of the earliest and most outspoken Egyptian bloggers; his blog (al-Wa’y al-Miṣrī, http://misrdigital.blogspot.com) goes back to 2004 and has earned numerous awards. Videos of police torture he published on his blog and his YouTube channel in 2007 helped to strengthen national and international criticism over police abuse in Egypt and led to unprecedented judicial conviction of police officers. His Twitter account is at http://twitter.com/waelabbas (281000 followers), his Facebook page at http://fb.me/waelabbas. — ‘Alā’ ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ and his wife Manāl Ḥasan started a communal blog (Manal and Alaa’s bit bucket free speech from the bletters; http://manalaa.net) in 2004; they did pioneering work to spread knowledge of how to use the internet, and blogging in particular, to help network young Egyptians and advance greater political awareness among them. ‘Alā’ has been arrested both under Mubarak, under SCAF, and under the current regime; he was last (June 2014) sentenced to 15 years in prison for protesting against the restrictive protest law passed in Nov. 2013. His Twitter feed is at http://twitter.com/ala (701000 followers); his Facebook page at http://fb.me/alaa (both currently inactive due to his arrest). — Ḫūsām al-Ḥamalāwī, a professional journalist, Revolutionary Socialist and leading proponent of workers’ rights, blogs at 3arabawy (http://arabawy.org); his Twitter feed is at http://twitter.com/3arabawy (291000 followers). — Nawāra Niğm is a journalist and prominent blogger (since 2006); her blog (Gābahat al-tahyīs al-sha’biyya; http://tahyyes.blogspot.com) has not been updated since 7 July 2014, but she continues to be outspoken on Twitter (Ha-kalim li l-qāḍī, https://twitter.com/nawaranegm, 736000 followers). — Wā’il Khalil is a longstanding leftist activist who tweets at http://twitter.com/wael (291000 followers). — Gamāl ʿĪd is a leading human rights activist and founder of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI; http://anhri.net) that successfully used the internet to revolutionise the way Arab human rights organisations worked; his Twitter feed is at https://twitter.com/gamaleid (388000 followers), his Facebook page at http://fb.me/gamal.eid.90. All Twitter follower numbers as of 16 Jan. 2015.
counterrevolution gained the upper hand. As if to confirm that what F criticised continued to be an issue, however, one of the commentators to her post expressed that “we” can never cooperate with the MB since “our demands are freedom and justice [NB: playing on the name of the MB’s Freedom and Justice Party; i.e. asserting that we are the ones really representing these demands] while your demands are Mursi and Badi’ [the Supreme Guide of the MB]. It’s impossible for us to agree. We stand for principles; you for persons.” And that is why, in this commentator’s view, the MB has betrayed the revolution; in their hunger for power, they made deals with the military and refrained from reforming any of the key state institutions.

Figure 2: Cartoon against infighting among the revolutionaries

Disgust with this infighting within the pro-revolution camp led F to choose a position of abstention (rather than withdrawal into silence). She continued to speak her mind, maintaining a clear and open political stance against the military-backed counter-revolution, but was no longer actively politically engaged as before in the 6 April Youth Movement, even before the movement was banned in April 2014.

Steadfastness?

11 The cartoon by Muḥammad al-Shādhilī shows the shadows of two street fighters in the background busy throwing accusations at each other: “You’re a traitor!” “Where were you 30 years ago?” “So you took the parliament?” “You’ve sold the revolution!” “You rode the revolution!”—while a portly Mubarak walks away well-pleased: “Sweet, really!!” The cartoon goes back to late 2011 and began to spread on the internet just prior to the first anniversary of Mubarak’s resignation (e.g. http://daftara7wal-mohamed.blogspot.com/2012/02/jan25-egypt-tahrir.html, 1 Feb. 2012; for more results, see http://is.gd/2vKNks). It was republished on the Diddak Facebook page on 14 Aug. 2014 (http://fb.me/AgainstSese/photos/a.1436298119954217.1073741828.1436296546621041/1466979956886033/).
A fifth position was not mentioned by F—perhaps since it was not so prominent on her wall. This is represented by Revolutionary Socialist Māhinūr al-Maṣrī (b. 1986). From prison, where she was held by the new authorities for protesting against the counter-revolution, Māhinūr wrote: 'We participated in the demonstrations on 30 June 2013 and called upon Mursī to step down, and we don’t regret it because we believe in the right of the people to be free and express their opinion freely'.

A variegated picture

These five positions delineate important ideal-types; in reality, however, my material includes almost every possible combination of Muslim, Christian, agnostic, socialist, islamist, ex-MB, liberal, disillusioned, steadfast, withdrawn, openly or indirectly critical, purportedly apolitical, in exile or in the army. There’s the Christian secularist who supported the anti-Mursī demonstrations but is not happy with the way things have developed under Sīsī and doesn’t hide her views. There is the flamboyant 6 April activist and practicing Muslim who was disillusioned already back in 2012 with the way the country took, and who now is trying to find a foot in the job market while seeking help in astrology. There is the rather introvert revolutionary intellectual who claimed he was ready to die to defend the revolution against the military and who now has become a disillusioned critic seeking shelter with the liberal-democratic Constitution Party. There is the revolutionary street fighter who in 2011 lived on the frontline facing the security forces’ snipers and gas, and who after being drafted into national service now proudly displays his paratrooper uniform, all the while dropping sarcastic remarks in the direction of the army officers leading the country. There is the Muslim Brotherhood dissident who tried to change the Brotherhood’s fossilised structures before 2010 and opposed their power games after the revolution, and who is now in exile criticising both MB and ‘so-called liberals’ for their betrayal. There is his fellow MB dissident whose Facebook account is no longer updated because he fell victim to a bullet during a demonstration sometime after the military takeover. There is the young and devoted Muslim Brother who fervently supported the right of the MB to rule and who after the bloody crackdown of August 2013 took care not to publish anything on Facebook but pious prayer formulas... in short, a gamut of positions that made the picture appear unclear to many an observer three years after Mubarak’s fall: “there are no clear lines” (ḥurūf il-kilma mish wāḍha).

Two participants’ analyses

A) Uncertainty... and the abandoning of agency

That “there are no clear lines” in the path of the revolution and in the revolutionaries’ attitudes and acts was not the only feeling of young poet Aḥmad Salâma (b. 1985). “25 January was a dream not come true...!!” To mourn the death of this dream, Aḥmad wrote an obituary, the

poem “R.I.P. Revolution” (al-Baqāʾ liʾllāh yā thawra), published on Facebook on the third anniversary of 25 January:15

  Rest in peace, revolution
  get a grip on yourself
  the dream of our youth was killed
  we were killed, eye by eye
  the bullet was dumb
  the gunner: a coward
  the bullet struck Bahiyya
  the bond of the Square came apart
  the gunner: he had been one us!
  the bullet reached all the way to Sinai
  it was made in USA
  it sowed division in our homeland
  it split our solid ranks
  the rift between us widened
  difference of opinion was now called, ‘religion’:
  you’re Muslim! you’re an unbeliever!
  you’re indecent boys and girls!
  you’re Shīʿī you’re Sunni!
  and you’re Muslim Brotherhood!
  you: play! you: sing!
  you: delegate! you: congratulate!
  you: outbid! you: justify!
  you: play the downcast!
  you: write! you: edit!
  you: pass the ball! you: let it go!
  you: flirt! you: kick!
  you: throw into jail!
  you: lie in ambush!
  you: heat up! you: switch!
  you: drum up! you: jeer!
  and you: proclaim to the public:
  the Arab Spring was a lie
  and you are the biggest liars!

---

Aḥmad Salāma proclaimed the revolution dead amid a cacophony of divisions; an activist as long-established and prominent as Wāʾil ‘Abbās also—and already during the 30 June 2013 demonstrations, i.e. before the military takeover was a fact—tweeted: “It’s over. The revolution is over. The heroes who really died or were thrown into jail are rotting there. The only heroes who still think of themselves as heroes are those of the Ramadan TV serials...”

Why this defeatism?

In Aḥmad Salāma’s view—a view he restated several times over the past years—the basic reason was that SCAF had very skilfully and successfully used MB and salafis (among others tools) to derail and kill the revolution and re-establish the old regime that SCAF clearly belongs to. SCAF stands for counter-revolution. Here is a slightly abbreviated paraphrase of the article:

SCAF manipulated the MB and the salafis to obtain a yes vote in the referendum on the constitutional amendments in March 2011. The islamists focused on Article 2, and on the role of Islam in the constitution, threatening everyone who would oppose it with eternal hellfire. While the 1971 constitution should have been null and void after the revolution, and legitimacy should have been revolutionary legitimacy, SCAF managed to manipulate the islamists to get the people to support a counterrevolutionary constitution that granted SCAF ultimate powers. This yes vote, obtained by manipulation, lies at the heart of all subsequent problems; it led Egypt down the path of problematic parliamentary elections, the disputed composition of the constitutional assembly, presidential elections where the final choice was between two non-revolutionary candidates who were both not representative of the revolution and were both heralding a return to the status quo ante, and laws that restricted the basic principles of public freedom and the right to peaceful demonstration, and that opened the door to restoring the state of emergency. The so-called ‘transitional period’ was therefore not transitional at all, but was and still is in fact a period of vengeance by the old regime against a people that had aspired to freedom, dignity, and social justice, to overcome the fetters of economic exploitation, ignorance, and corruption; a people that wanted to write its own constitution so that it could express its aspirations and enshrine its rights and obligations. Does this people deserve to be misled and betrayed in such a way?

‘Where is the agency in this view?’ the critical observer asks. In practice, it rests exclusively with the representatives of the old regime who manipulate the islamists, mislead the people, and obstruct the revolutionaries to their hearts desire. They are so expertly doing this that no-one is able to resist them in any meaningful way. Effective agency is assigned exclusively to the old regime forces. The path that led to 3 July 2013, to the counterrevolution triumphant, was already laid out in March 2011; nothing has substantially changed since then.

I think it is essential to see that the revolutionary’s feeling of uncertainty, disillusionment, and defeat is linked to his practical abandonment of agency. The powers that be are so cleverly manipulating all others that any attempt at resistance is bound to fail. The revolutionary feels it is pointless to fight on, and declares the revolution “dead” or assigns it to the realm of dreams that cannot be realised in real life.

17 Aḥmad Salāma, “al-Marḥala al-intiqāmiyya”, written during the clashes at the Presidential Palace in December 2012, when opponents of Mursī’s infamous decree exempting the president from judicial oversight were attacked by MB militias. The piece was first published on Facebook on 12 Dec. 2012 <http://is.gd/ysC70r> and referred to again by its author in August 2013 and in July 2014.
The “Broken Wall of Fear”?

How does this giving up of agency square with the defiant spirit of 2011, with the “broken wall of fear” that was celebrated in the earlier days of the revolution? 18

Various answers have been given to this; among the more interesting analyses is one that argues that the wall of fear has not broken down completely but that it became “broken fear” (al-khawf al-maksūr), a chaotic emotional condition that among other effects lowered the barrier for using or acclaiming violence to get across one’s position, thus leading to increased violence and division. 19

“A Myth!”

Another view has, however, gained more ground among revolutionary activists since repression turned against everyone opposing the new military regime. It regards the celebrated breaking of the wall of fear as a naïve and short-sighted view, a myth not sustained in real life. A revolutionary socialist—anonimised here as “Z”—developed this view in some detail, and is worth quoting at length:

“No, the wall of fear has not broken down. That’s one of the myths of the revolution, born out of merely looking at one point in time and forgetting all that preceded it, by looking at the event and not the whole process. To use a sexual metaphor, as is so common in Egypt: we have a clear problem of premature ejaculation; we fail to have a sufficiently long intercourse to build up a proper climax.

What fear are we talking about anyhow? How can such old-established instincts disappear just because we managed to confront Mubarak’s police and forced Mubarak’s system to remove him from office. 20

Never mind that Mubarak’s stepping down actually was good for factions of the old system, and was partly orchestrated by it!

Audacity towards the ruler has [a long history! It has] been growing since the time of Sadat and before; remember the “Aḥā” demonstrations [in English mostly known as the ‘bread riots’ of 1977] or the satirical poems and songs by Aḥmad Fu’ād Niǧm and al-Shaykh Imām after 1968, or the iconoclasm of Bayram al-Tūnsī [1893-1961], or you can go back to al-Ǧabartī [1753-1825] and so on — popular resistance against Muḥammad ‘Alī’s ‘modernisation’ project was huge. 21

True, this phenomenon, audacity towards the ruler, has grown in size since the Kifāya movement [against Mubarak, v.i.] was born [2004], on the internet, in the streets, in the press – even if, as it were, some of the heroes of this period today are supporting al-Sīsī.

18 Cf. these tweets by Wā’il Ghunaym: <http://twitter.com/Ghonim/status/113770540623331328> (14 Sep. 2011); “The Egyptian people are learning democracy now; they have broken the wall of fear. It’s impossible that we return to the old order where people were intimidated from considering any alternative” <http://twitter.com/Ghonim/status/216199905348292609> (22 June 2012).


20 Notice that Z does not say, ‘we forced him to step down.’ He is more conscious of the complicated context.

21 Vernacular poet Aḥmad Fu’ād Niǧm (1929-2013) and singer al-Shaykh Imām (1918-1995) were a duo performing political songs defending the rights of the poor and critical of the regime; their songs were highly popular in the 1960s and 1970s but banned on state media; they experienced a renaissance in the 2000s among the current generation of leftist youth.—Niǧm was influenced by Bayram al-Tūnsī, a poet whose satire slammed the British and their Egyptian puppets in the 1919 revolution to such an extent that he was exiled for over a decade.—ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Ǧabartī is best known for his critical chronicle of events in Egypt during the time of the French invasion (1798-1801) and the subsequent seizure of power by Muḥammad ‘Alī (until 1805).
Even a harsh sceptic like Z conceded, however:

Something has fallen even now under the military state, it’s gone indefinitely (though not necessarily forever): you can hear criticism of the regime even from the foulest regime propagandists. And of course the army and religion no longer enjoy the same sanctity that they have had for much longer than the president.22 But what we really are afraid of did indeed happen, and that is what now keeps the youth from rushing to their death at the gates of the Interior Ministry or from shouting slogans in the streets against military rule: death is now liberally dispensed, free of charge,23 and it is the masses that often serve as the mightiest force of deterrence.

During the clashes on Muḥammad Maḥmūd and Cabinet Streets in November/December 2011, people had been wearing stickers proclaiming that they were, “Martyr in spe” (shahīd taḥt al-ṭalab), and they emphatically asserted that they were serious about their readiness to die. This posture was far less common after the bloody dispersal of the Rābiʿa and Nahḍa sit-ins; some, like Z, had abandoned it already much earlier:

In the evening of 28 January 2011, police bullets were flying right and left of me, smoke and gas were so thick that it was impossible to see anything, and I was jumping around in an ecstatic, mindless dance of death, hurling rocks that were not hitting any target. Then on 2 February, I overcame my fear of a medieval massacre and took part in throwing rocks at the Mubarak supporters at the Egyptian Museum until I no longer could lift my arm. Would I dare to do the same thing now? Trust me: when I was hit by thick gas at Maspero at the second anniversary of the revolution [25 January 2013] and fell to the dirty ground of ‘Abd al-Munʿim Riyāḍ bus stop [next to Taḥrīr Square], I decided I would not expose myself to this again. I’m worried I might get cancer or something, years down the road, especially if all should turn out to be in vain, and also because unfortunately I’m aware of the limits of solidarity among the revolutionaries. Well, we know that everything is relative, and nothing has been or will be completely in vain. But we have had fear, and we have fear, and we will have fear (and who knows, perhaps feeling reassured is no better [as it would lead us into superficial complacency]!)

Fear can only be disrupted[, not completely broken]. Tearing down this wall is a mere dream for the future, which hinges on major social and individual change. Which is not happening. I mean ‘overcoming,’ ‘transcending’ in the philosophical sense. To break the vicious cycle once and for all in an epic, relentless effort. Pure magic, in other words. Some have spoken of another variety of the idea of ‘the broken wall of fear’: “The Return of the Spirit” (ʿAwdat al-Rūḥ)—an expression that goes back to the generation of [the revolution of] 1919 ([and by the way] the one who coined this expression is the same who also wrote “The Return of Consciousness” [ʿAwdat al-Waʿy] [and who thereby laid out the trajectory from celebrating the revolutionary myth to disillusion with the failed revolution's reality]).24 I ask myself: is this an “eternal return” [Nietzsche], or is it Sisyphus, eternally ascending and falling down again?)

Comparison and metaphor are [of course] mere rhetorical devices at best. In [the national revolution of] 1919, we were facing (perhaps dual) colonialism. At that time, the nascent nation was brought to a whole new post-ʿUrābian level.25 But in 2011, one of the elements that killed our revolution was nationalism or

22 Note that this was written in mid-2014.
23 In other words, the situation has not changed substantially from 2010, when researchers conceded that the power of blogs could be suppressed by the force of bullets if rulers so choose (Sean Aday, Henry Farrell, March Lynch, John Sides, John Kelly, Ethan Zuckerman, Blogs and bullets: new media in contentious politics, Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 2010).
24 Both are novels by renowned Egyptian writer Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (1898-1987). ‘Awdat al-Rūḥ (1933) celebrates ‘the people’ in the lead-up the 1919 revolution that was the ‘return of the spirit’; ‘Awdat al-Waʿy (1974) reflects Egyptian intellectuals’ disillusionment with Nasser and Nasserism.
25 Reference is to the nationalist revolt led by Ahmad ʿUrābī (1841-1911) that 1879-1882 tried to fight the foreign (Ottoman, French, and British) grip on Egypt. British and French forces crushed the revolt militarily, leading to the British occupation of Egypt after 1882.
patriotism. What has nationalism to do in a revolution against a national regime that clearly did not only consist of Mubarak, as has become obvious even to those who did not already know or believe it?

I don't see a progression in what is happening now. We are [just] waiting for a new outbreak of popular anger, which would perhaps replace one military figure by another. Our activists are, justifiably this time, [focusing on a narrower goal; they are] dedicated to getting those detained out of jail or at least to improving their situation. Yes, of course I am generalising here; that is natural and legitimate. This is a frustrated generation, and all those well-wishing people of good intentions take it for granted that this generation is sooner or later going to take over and rule, just because it will be their turn, and that things will be different under them.

[...] 

[But] it is funny that the avant-garde of the revolutionary generation do not conceive of themselves as an elite at all. It's as if we are over head and ears stuck in the ancien, in the old society.”

Z thus identifies as a core problem that those who should be the avant-garde of the revolution are not assuming the necessary leadership. They are giving up the agency that they should exercise. As for the ‘broken wall of fear’—that is a myth born out of idolising the ‘revolutionary moment’ while forgetting that true change is a long process that can succeed only through sustained effort, maintained by revolutionaries conscious of their role and ready to assume responsibility and avant-garde leadership.

Giving up agency and being content with reminiscing about past revolutionary glories (such as the now proverbial “18 days” on Tahrir in 2011) has also been a problem in past struggles, Z maintains, but unfortunately, today’s revolutionaries have not learned the lesson. Earlier in 2014, Z published some extended reflections on the revolution. He begins by describing a scene a couple of years ago where two well-known leftist intellectuals sit in the cafeteria of the state’s Supreme Cultural Council where they “enjoy the sweetness of debate.” In their youth, they had been at the forefront of revolutionary action; now, after three decades spent within the confines the state had granted the intellectuals, they had turned into “book worms” feeding on ideas, philosophising and barking about politics and being content with doing no more than sitting in their café. They agreed that “their was no solution” to the country’s problems, but that would not prevent them from enjoying “the sweetness of debate”. Z then goes on to criticise his own revolutionary comrades for not going beyond dismissing these old fighters as “state progressives” and for explaining what is happening now merely in terms of an intergenerational conflict. At heart, today’s young revolutionaries have not really learned the lessons of their revolutionary predecessors; they are therefore prone to committing the same mistake: idolising the ‘revolutionary moment’ that they experienced at the height of their own struggles, they have come to make their peace with the society and the state that reabsorb them, even as they claim to be continuing to work towards changing the system, through reform, opposition, critical analysis, human rights activism, etc. ‘Breaking the wall of fear’ is of no use if not practiced continuously (as opposed to be merely conjured up as ‘that moment’ when the wall of fear was broken). Celebrating the success of ‘small steps’ allows today’s revolutionaries, again, blissfully to ignore that the system in its deep and wide sense is not changing.

But what is the consequence of Z’s critique in his own practice? One evening in late 2011, I met him on Cabinet Street where we attended a public discussion among the participants of the sit-
Debate raged about the strategy to pursue (whether or not to move the sit-in to Taḥrīr Square). When Z was unable to get across his view in the matter, he became so upset and disgusted with the ‘chaotic’ way of debating that he got up and left, basically saying that ‘this is no use at all’. Sure, he is no Saʿd Zaghlūl, and his giving up did not lead to the others leaving as well. But his reaction was not untypical of an attitude that I had come across frequently that autumn: revolutionaries who had the best of intentions, but became frustrated with not being able to unite enough people behind them to put their ideas into sustainable practice, and who then withdrew in frustration complaining about the ‘chaotic way of doing things’ and the 'inability of the revolutionaries to coordinate.'

We sat down in a café where Z explained to me the futility of such chaotic efforts, and then he went home. He also withdrew from Facebook, deleted his account there, and returned to blogging (which he described in 2011 as a much better forum for the development of ideas than the chaotic and noisy Facebook and Twitter). In other words, he chose to preserve the purity of his revolutionary ideas and of his analysis, but in a rather isolated corner of the net. He can thus be seen as doing just the same as the two old revolutionaries who he described as merely sitting in a café and enjoying the sweetness of their own debates, instead of continuing to act on the street.

We may thus say that like Aḥmad Salāma, also Z is in practice giving up his agency, even though he himself diagnoses this as a core problem among the revolutionaries. And he is not alone in this; one of the most oft-repeated self-criticisms among the revolutionaries has been and continues to be that ‘we have not been able to carry our activism from the net out into the streets, at least not in a sufficient and sustainable way; we have a problem of organisation, and that’s why the counter-revolutionary forces have been able to maintain the upper hand.’

**Activists are not politicians (but a different kind of agents)**

This, however, is the critical view. A more sympathetic view would recognise that activists (a) are conscious of the fact that they are a minority and that their opponents are better organised and financed; and (b) that due to these circumstances as well as to their background as individuals having grown up on the net, so to speak, they operate on a different plan. Most of them do not conceive of themselves as politicians. They are angry young men and women who grew up expressing their anger on the net, publicly, criticising abuses and shortcomings, networking with and learning from like-minded people; often engaging themselves and excelling in civil journalism and other media activities, often willing to take personal risks and bearing the consequences of state repression (but in other cases refusing to do so). Activists are not politicians dealing and wheeling in the corridors of power, but a different kind of actors who continue to work the attention economy, creatively utilising available means even if they

---

26 Some are more protected by their celebrity status, others not; some celebrities appear to be targeted by the state specifically to set a warning example (e.g. ‘Alā’ Abd al-Fattāḥ who was put on trial both under Mubarak, SCAF, and Sisi).
are not sure whether this is a Sisyphean task. They are convinced that even if Ṭahrīr is in military hands for now, the revolution “lives on within us” (il-thawra ġuwwānā).²⁷

‘Withdrawal’ really as pronounced as some believe?

So is the ‘withdrawal’ from public action really as pronounced as some would believe?

Some, to be sure, have withdrawn completely into family and private life (Wā’il Ghunaym, for example). But even if they disappear from the social media, traces often still reveal that they are dissatisfied with the restoration of the old order (Wā’il Ghunaym again serves as an example here). Whether their dissatisfaction will explode again, or whether they rather will remain cautious due to their negative experiences, their disappointment, their disillusionment, their opting to pursue more private goals, is difficult to say from the material I have. There are too many different dispositions that appear there, and we can therefor concur with Ḥalmād Salāma in that “there are no clear lines.”

On the other hand, however, it is also evident from looking at the social media that most of those who became active years ago continue as they did before. Their formatting experiences often were the demonstrations against the Iraq invasion 2003 and/or the ‘Kifāya’ movement 2004/5 against a renewed presidential term for Mubarak and against the grooming of his son Ğamāl as his father’s successor. The Kifāya movement coincided with and was promoted by the large-scale adoption of blogging in Egypt as a tool for political expression, and “the bloggers” (al-mudawwinin) became a term widely used for net activists even after most of them adopted Facebook and Twitter as their primary venues where they could reach a larger audience. These people were not “born on the 25 of January”;²⁸ they were not a mere product of the revolutionary moment. And based on the material I have looked at, I cannot find that fighting withdrawal was a major issue among the core activists anymore by summer 2014, the anniversary of the military takeover. Given the harsh hand of the new regime in clamping down on political opposition, some have adopted a narrower cause rather than grand political change; examples are the widespread campaigns to end sexual harassment, such as #OpEndSH; the campaigns to free political detainees or improve their conditions of detention; or the campaign against military trials for civilians (@NoMilTrials).²⁹ These campaigns may be more

---

²⁷ This slogan was prominently raised on 25 January 2014 when revolutionary demonstrators spread the call to withdraw from Taḥrīr Square in order to avoid useless confrontations with the security forces. But the phrase itself is much older. As we have seen above (the example of emy redwan), it goes back to the early revolutionary days when people used it to reassert themselves and others that all was not lost, despite apparent backlashes. The earliest example I was able to find was in a posting on a discussion forum on 26 February 2011, expressing the resolve not to slip into pessimism, but to hold on to the revolutionary spirit (Ḥammādō, http://www.egyptsons.com/misr/archive/index.php/t-163424-p-39.html). The catchphrase continued to be used in this sense ever since. In summer 2014, it was chanted in court by supporters of Mahīnūr al-Maṣrī (Khālid Bidārī, “Bīl-šuwar... risālat ‘Māhīnūr al-Maṣrī’ tulhib ḥamās al-nushaṭā fī ma’räḍīhā”, Veto, 5 June 2014, <http://www.vetogate.com/1052198>).

²⁸ Mawlūd fī 25 Yanāyir is the title of a documentary by independent Egyptian film director Ḥalmād Rashwān, released in late 2011.

²⁹ Lā li'l-muḥākamāt al-‘askariyya li'il-madanīyyīn, campaign started in summer 2011, <http://tahrirdiaries.org>, <http://fb.me/NoMilTrials>, <http://twitter.com/nomiltrials>. Several campaigns against sexual harassment picked up momentum since 2012; on these, see Jon Nordenson, Participation in (a) Public: Online Activism in Egypt and Kuwait, PhD dissertation, University of Oslo, February 2014. Campaigns to free political detainees mostly focused on individuals; for a start, see the hashtag #FreeTheDetained on Topsy.
(harassment) or less (military trials) successful; some may even be regarded as an ostensible ‘escape’ from matters Egyptian (such as the solidarity campaigns for Gaza during the Israeli bombardment in July-August 2014). But this engagement makes it impossible to say that a kind of complacent ‘Biedermeier’ withdrawal into the private is the predominant order of the day.

The hope (some may say, the ‘naïve’ optimism) of 2011 has been suppressed by bullets and gas for the time being but its traces remain palpable on quite a number of social media accounts, even among those who state that the revolution has died for the moment. It has not changed the system, but it has changed ‘us’. It lives on within us. Radicals like Z may criticise this as mere café talk, but even he admits that audacity towards the ruler has expanded in size and that old taboos no longer enjoy the same sanctity as before.

The revolution is alive within us

On 2 July 2014, Wâ’il ‘Abbâs and many revolutionary activists retweeted the poem “When hope dies, nothing blooms in that land” by Nelly Ali, written to strengthen the revolutionaries’


32 Acclaimed satirist Bâṣim Yūsuf insisted, a year after the military take-over and right after he had withdrawn from continuing his show il-Barnâmiğ due to unsustainable political pressure, that “Fear sells, fear works, fear is a winner. Satire and comedy might be one of the very few antidotes against fear.” And he put his hope on the young: “The propaganda that worked for their parents’ generation won’t be able to control them anymore … Fear is unsustainable, it cannot build nations, it only destroys.” Addressing those currently in power, he concluded by saying, “In the books of history you will lose and in the hearts of the young, you have already lost” (“Bassem Youssef: Fear has no future”, Deutsche Welle, 30 June 2014, <http://www.dw.de/bassem-youssef-fear-has-no-future/a-17747272>). Bâṣim Yûsuf’s talk at the Global Media Forum was heavily retweeted at the time.
confidence despite the odds of the time—at heart, a poetic version of the pleas that liberal democrat 'Amr Ḥamzāwī published in *al-Shurūq* at the same time:33

A generation of youth laying their friends to rest
A generation of mothers with an empty nest
A story about Egypt, and its struggle for hope
A story of millions defying the tightening rope
The struggle for Freedom, Dignity and Bread
About the punishment they got instead
Take Alaa for example who got sentenced 15 years
For being moved to revolt against torture and tears
Thousands of others also, to prison were sent
A handful of supporters protesting wherever they went
Others gave up and they carry the shame
Because the search for freedom...... was done in their name
They’ll squint and say “I’ve seen you’re face before
But they’re so many of you taken, I’ve lost the score”
Those ‘taken’ are strong now with a mission inside
They’re a window to the misconduct authorities try to hide
[...]
I’m talking of a generation that solemnly fought
That were betrayed by their protectors but kept afloat
If you’re not part of the revolution don’t be part of the betrayal
Don’t give in to the oppressors and join those who haim
Of course it’s not easy to keep fighting but that’s the cost
which we must pay for years of silence that we’ve lost
Those still fighting for tomorrow have reason to believe
And yes change will come, no, no that’s not naive
It’s a struggle for justice, one that will continue
Thousands of heroic sacrifices that can’t but win you
Of course it’s a long rough journey, yes, I understand
But when hope dies, nothing blooms on that land.

33 Nelly Ali is a British-Egyptian living in the UK. She published her poem on her blog <http://nellyali.wordpress.com/2014/07/02/when-hope-dies-nothing-blooms-in-that-land/>; it was retweeted many times by the Egyptian activist community (see http://topsy.com/s?q=When%20hope%20dies%20nothing%20blooms%20in%20that%20land).—‘Amr Ḥamzāwī, “ʿĀm marr”, *al-Shurūq*, 30 June 2014,
The first commentator on Nelly's blog wrote, “I love this poem – Keep speaking your truth! I hope the world wakes up to the fact that your either part of the solution or part of the problem. I’m so glad, that despite how bad it gets, how democracy dies behind closed doors, people like you and me keep questioning authority.”

At the end, their can be no predictions. The lines really are unclear; disappointment and disillusionment are a fact that many revolutionaries in Egypt are struggling with. But there continue to be many voices insisting that giving up is not an option, that the revolution has withdrawn from Tahrir for the time being, but continues to “live in our hearts”.

On the surface, the ‘deep state’ has managed, through harsh repression, to reassert itself. But the ancien regimes “have a dirty little secret. They’re afraid of us. They’re not afraid of those with guns; after all, they have bigger guns. But they’re afraid of those with ideas.” While such statements may partly be seen as whistling in the dark, it remains a fact not only that many revolutionaries share this attitude, but also that the ruling regimes are in fact trying to suppress these ideas as much as possible, revealing how afraid they really are of them. Given this fact, it is all the more important that those who are not susceptible to direct persecution continue to support forums for alternative visions and free debate in Egypt. Outside actors such as Norway should

- help to keep open spaces—physical and virtual—for alternative information flows, like the ‘Tahrir Lounge’ supported by the German Foreign Ministry;
- monitor and publicly criticise attempts to restrict such spaces and hold Egyptian authorities accountable for such restrictions.

36 The Tahrir Lounge was founded in April 2011 to help “support democratic values and to build a strong tolerant society” through a range of activities including workshops, public debates, exhibits, and more; it continues to provide an important forum for free debate in Cairo. See http://www.tahrirlounge.org/index.php/en/aboutus/item/105-the-project.
The New Middle East: Emerging Political and Ideological Trends (NewME)

A research project based at the University of Oslo, comprising researchers from PRIO and the UiO. There are several researchers on the project, each working on their own sub-projects within a common framework. The project started in 2011 and will be completed by the summer of 2016. The project is founded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.