Withdrawal from Taḥrīr? Voices from the social media on the fate of the revolution

This policy brief summarises results of a survey of how ‘revolutionaries’ 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.

After the polarisation of Egyptian politics culminated in the military takeover of 3 July 2013 and the violent crackdown on the MB, Egyptians who had embraced the 25 January 2011 revolution were divided in their reaction. The MB called for steadfastness; among others, however, who had opposed military rule under the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF, 2011-12) as much as the Brotherhood’s attempt to appropriate the state, disillusionment spread. Secularists opposed to military rule were squeezed between the ‘steadfast’ but unrepentant Brothers; a population tired of insecurity and disruptions to the economy; an unreformed security apparatus; and a re-assertive ‘deep state’ that all but outlawed public demonstrations and any activity that could be interpreted as subverting the military’s supremacy.

No wonder that some who had engaged in public in 2011-12 now tended to withdraw—a reaction that both the Brotherhood and secular opponents of the military tried to fight. To find how individual participants perceived developments, I investigated reflections on social media around the 2014 anniversary of 25 January (when ‘revolutionary’ demonstrators withdrew from Taḥrīr Square to avoid confrontation with state security);
and around the first anniversary of the military takeover. Does the withdrawal from ‘Taḥrīr’ (the paradigmatic symbol of street power) signify a withdrawal into the private sphere? Or are we witnessing a readjustment, cognizant of a longer time frame? 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 revolution? How do individual actors view their own trajectory in the revolution?

2011: “I will keep the revolution alive”

From the beginning, people had been concerned that the revolution could be derailed—but optimism prevailed. “We have broken the wall of fear”, and “if things go wrong, we know the way back to Taḥrīr” were familiar phrases. A young girl’s 2011 blog post, “The Revolution and Me”, emphatically articulates this spirit: the revolution cannot be aborted since it lives in the hearts of a generation that revolted against themselves before revolting against the ruler; it will stay alive as long as those who carry its spirit are alive—and failing that, “I” will keep it alive as long as I live!


What became of this spirit when the revolution stumbled? The blog above was last updated in September 2012; others, too, have fallen silent, most prominently Wael Ghonim, founder of the Facebook page Kullīnā Khālid Saʻīd that played a leading role in the 2011 revolution. Ghonim had supported anti-Mursī demonstrations but warned against those who were dreaming to restore the old order. Right after the military takeover, he stopped updating his social media accounts, breaking his silence only once to explain: “As all my efforts have failed, I decided to withdraw so as not to be part of a sedition where Egyptian blood is spilled and [human] rights are thrown overboard.”

But Ghonim’s withdrawal into silence cannot be regarded as typical; he has always been an outsider compared to more long-established activists like Wael Abbas, Alaa Abd El-Fattah, Hossam el-Hamalawy, Wael Khalil, or Gamal Eid, all of whom continued to voice their views publicly.

Positions in the ‘non-silent’ camp were variegated, however. A former activist (F) in the April 6 Youth Movement observed that Facebook posts on the first anniversary of the demonstrations against Mursī fell into three groups: (1) ‘I demonstrated against Mursī and regret having participated in a crime’; (2) ‘I demonstrated for the legitimate president and want him back’; (3) ‘I celebrate the end of MB rule’. She herself abstained, however, because it was clear that the MB-secular confrontation opened the way for the counter-revolution. This analysis was common in 2012: SCAF only made concessions when revolutionaries and MB stood united. As if to confirm that
what F criticised really was an issue, however, one of the commentators to her post wrote that ‘we’ can never cooperate with the MB since ‘we’ have principles while they have not, leading them to betray the revolution. Disgusted with this infighting, F chose abstention, continuing to speak out but no longer actively politically engaged as before in the April 6 Youth Movement.

A fifth position was not mentioned by F—it was not so prominent on her wall. It is represented by Revolutionary Socialist Mahienour writing from prison where she was held by the new authorities for agitating against the counter-revolution: ‘We demonstrated against Mursi and don’t regret it since we believe in people’s freedom to express themselves’.

These five positions mark ideal-types; in reality, my material includes a gamut of positions illustrating that “there are no clear lines”.

**Abandoning agency: the myth of the ‘broken wall of fear’**

The full report details two activists’ analysis of the revolutionary trajectory, 2011-14. The first declared that “25 January was a dream not come true”—because SCAF had successfully used MB and salafis to derail it, laying the ground already in the March 2011 referendum, in which islamsits supported a counterrevolutionary constitution that opened the way to all subsequent problems.

In this view, the old powers are so cleverly manipulating all others that any attempt at resistance must fail. Agency is assigned exclusively to the old regime forces. The revolutionary’s feeling of uncertainty and disillusionment is linked to his practical abandonment of agency.

How does this square with the “broken wall of fear”? Another activist (Z) called this “a myth, born out of merely looking at one moment, not the whole process.” “Audacity towards the ruler” has a long history in Egypt, but although it has grown in size since the mid-2000s—on the internet, in the streets, in the press—bullets and gas have been effective in driving many off the streets for fear for their lives. “Fear can only be disrupted,” not completely broken. “Tearing down this wall is a dream for the future, hinging on major social and individual change.” This is not impossible, but currently we are merely “waiting for a new outbreak of popular anger that would perhaps replace one military figure by another.” “This is a frustrated generation;” it is by no means obvious that the hopes optimists place in ‘the youth’ will materialise once this generation takes over. For “the avant-garde of the revolutionary generation does not conceive of itself as an elite at all.” It does not assume leadership.

Z identifies as a core problem the revolutionaries abandoning the agency they should exercise. This has also been a problem in past struggles. Today’s revolutionaries, not having learned the lesson, are making the same mistake: idolising their ‘revolutionary moment’, they risk being reabsorbed by the state and society, even as they claim to continue working for change. Celebrating the success of small steps, they ignore that the system at heart is not changing.
While recognizing the problem, in practice Z ended up the same way: frustrated with the revolutionaries' shortcomings and worrying about his personal safety, he stopped participating in demonstrations, withdrew from social media, and returned to publishing occasional thoughts via more isolated avenues.

Activists are not politicians but a different type of agents

Merely criticising this abandonment of agency, however, remains one-sided. A fuller assessment recognises that activists know that they are a minority facing opponents who are better organised and financed. They are not politicians but angry young people who grew up expressing their anger publicly, networking and engaging in ‘civil journalism’. They continue to work the attention economy, creatively utilising available means even if this seems a Sisyphean task. They are convinced that even if Taḥrīr is in military hands for now, the revolution “lives on within us”. Most of those who became activists years ago continue as they did before—they were not “born on 25 January”.

Some adopted a narrower cause rather than grand political change; their engagement may be more (OpEndSexualHarassment) or less (NoMilTrials) successful, or even an ‘escape’ from Egypt (Gaza), but it makes it impossible to say that withdrawal prevails. The hope of 2011 has been suppressed by bullets but its traces remain palpable even among those who state that the revolution has died for the moment. It has not changed the system, but it has changed ‘us’. Radicals like Z may criticise this as escapism, 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.

- 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 criticize attempts to restrict such spaces and hold Egyptian authorities accountable for such restrictions.

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1 Source references are given in the full report.