

Precursors of the Egyptian Revolution

Khalid Ali

Abstract This article argues that there had been sustained protests for at least a decade before the January 25th uprisings, which functioned as the political incubators that nurtured the forces of the revolution, shaping people's political consciousness and organisational capacities. Over the past decade, Egyptians have protested against just about everything: regional occupations and Mubarak's inheritance plans, from encroachments on the judges' independence to poor wages, shortages of water and cooking gas, and attacks on Christians. In these demonstrations, this article argues, some of the most innovative and effective mechanisms of protest were deployed, yet the intelligentsia dismissed these events as too inconsequential for challenging the *status quo*. They were proven wrong.

How and when did the forces of the Egyptian revolution take shape? Answering this question requires an understanding of the forerunners of the Egyptian revolution, which have become increasingly visible over the last decade. The past decade has witnessed one of the most vibrant periods of Egyptian protest against Mubarak's regime. Egyptians rebelled for diverse reasons: on international matters, Arab causes, as well as domestic issues relating to civil, political, economic and social rights.

But what do these precursors tell us? Were they indicative of the salience of major political organisations or popular movements grounded in historical theories? Or were they simply spontaneous bursts without organisation and political consciousness whose actions and successes were simply a lucky happenstance? Or, are we in fact talking about a new phenomenon based on unconventional ways of engaging?

This article attempts to trace the harbingers of revolution through a number of 'signposts', in the hope of unfolding some dimensions of this highly dynamic and complex reality.

1 First signpost: establishment of the 'Popular Committee to Support the Palestinian Intifada'

The second Palestinian *Intifada* (uprising) that began in 2000 was accompanied by reprehensible Israeli attacks on Palestinians, which stoked Egyptians' solidarity with the Palestinians. They took to the streets in large demonstrations to

decry Israeli atrocities and to protest against the stance taken by Mubarak. Various political forces including human rights organisations and political parties founded the 'Popular Committee to Support the Palestinian Intifada', and subcommittees were formed in Egyptian universities and numerous governorates, cities and local neighbourhoods. The committees issued calls for demonstrations and collected food, medicine and clothes to be dispatched to the Palestinian people in solidarity convoys.

The Popular Committee succeeded in mobilising political and social forces in support of the Palestinian cause, recruiting school and university students to its activities, thus functioning as a political incubator, by teaching young people political and organisational skills and most importantly, creating an organisational umbrella to unite all political forces in the public arena. This constituted a challenge to the Mubarak regime and its repressive apparatus and laws. The Popular Committee publicly set up offices in all governorates without obtaining permission or consent from the authorities. All of its activities were public, whether organisational meetings, the collection of donations, the organisation of aid convoys, planning for demonstrations, and the preparation of political statements.

2 Second signpost: American invasion of Iraq

The year 2003 marked the US/European attack on Iraq and the beginning of the occupation. Large-scale demonstrations were organised of a

kind and scale unseen in Egypt since the uprising over price increases in 1977. Hundreds of protestors gathered in Tahrir Square and occupied it; security forces proved unable to deter them, and protestors spent the night in the square on the eve of the Iraqi invasion. During the demonstrations, police met protestors with violence and launched an arrest campaign targeting Nasserists and communists, as well as some Islamist leaders who had refused to demonstrate in the Cairo Stadium along with the Muslim Brotherhood and the National Democratic Party (NDP).

Large numbers of Egyptians turned out for this action not only because of the importance of the Arab issues but also because some Egyptians hold a particular fondness for Iraq, where for many years Egyptians of middle and low income could work without entry visas or local sponsors. Also, many Egyptian families feared that family members working in Iraq would be killed or injured, and that the war would entail a loss of their financial and economic stability. Upon returning to Egypt, assetless, they were unable to find work. There was thus much anger at the US occupation of the country and Mubarak and his regime, for supporting the war.

3 Third signpost: domestic Egyptian issues

A year later, protests against the US invasion of Iraq had largely subsided, but in the summer of 2004, Egyptian political forces announced the formation of two political committees established to confront Mubarak and his regime: the Egyptian Movement for Change (*Kifaya*) and the Popular Campaign for Change ('Freedom Now'). *Kifaya* (Enough) was the more well known of the two and involved a number of political forces, including Islamists, leftists, liberals, and Nasserists. Freedom Now was largely comprised of leftist factions that refused to join *Kifaya*. Despite this organisational difference, the groups complemented one another at certain historical junctures. While *Kifaya* called for demonstrations in Tahrir Square and in front of the Journalists Syndicate, Freedom Now organised demonstrations in popular neighbourhoods such as Matariya, Shubra and al-Zaytun. The focus of all political forces in all demonstrations and press statements was the rejection of an extended term of office for Mubarak and the transfer of power to his son Gamal.

This period witnessed fierce confrontations between political forces and the police. One of the most significant incidents involved the sexual harassment of female protestors, who were also insulted and beaten in front of the Journalists Syndicate, the Lawyers Syndicate, Sa'd Zaghlul's mausoleum, and in Tahrir Square.

Ultimately, the Mubarak regime was able to amend the constitution and Mubarak was elected to another term in office, but the plan to pass the presidency to Gamal Mubarak rested on shakier ground.

These political movements also managed to attract young people and students to politics and broke forever the taboo surrounding not contesting Mubarak and his family personally. Mubarak himself was widely criticised in the protests of 2000 and 2003, but his family emerged unscathed, in contrast to the protests of 2004–05, which were largely directed against the succession plan, i.e. against Mubarak's family.

4 Fourth signpost: the judges' battle

After the regime successfully rigged parliamentary and presidential elections in 2005, the Egyptian political movement felt defeated and grew silent. In such a political environment, however, a new battle came to the fore – between the government and the judges. In 2005, the Mubarak regime had forced judges into a corner; they had agreed to supervise the elections with no guarantees of transparency and accountability. The president of the committee overseeing presidential elections disqualified 1,700 judges from election supervision, and a bill drawn in 1991 to safeguard their independence was ignored (Al-Shahat 2006¹). Judges were thus asked not only to sign off on election rigging, but to remain silent about attacks on voters, harassment by thugs, and voter suppression. Some judges themselves were physically attacked, which was virtually unprecedented in Egyptian judicial history.² A total of 165 assaults on judges were documented during the parliamentary elections, yet only ten of them were investigated, according to figures from the Judges Club. In the wake of this, groups of judges led by the Egyptian Judges Club (a civic association established with the view of representing judges' interests) took action to demand full judicial independence from the executive authority.

Table 1 Documented labour protests (1999–2006)

Year	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Number of protests	164	135	138	96	86	266	202	222

In a meeting of the Judges Club general assembly on 13 May 2005, the president of the club, Judge Zakariya ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, told the assembled judges, ‘Do not forsake the people of Egypt and their hopes for democracy and reform’. For a variety of reasons, the battle for judicial independence became central to the battle for democracy.

First, judges enjoy substantial credibility among the Egyptian public. The demand for reform and accusations of election rigging came this time from people who were ostensibly a part of the basic power structure of any bourgeois state. Suddenly, meetings were taking place in which thousands of people who possessed judicial immunity and represented, at least formally, part of the constitutional system were exposing that very system. In short, a wing from within the regime with substantial credibility began to embarrass Mubarak and his clique.

Second, the demands of this wing coincided with the demands of pro-democracy movements. This was an extremely significant moment, suggesting that the Mubarak regime had begun fraying from the inside as core groups that had long been viewed as part of the system and the public authorities – like the judiciary – began turning against the regime. Tarek Al Bishri, famous writer and judge, noted that the Judges Club was not an ordinary professional association, but rather the institutional embodiment of the judiciary itself; professional independence for judges thus meant sovereignty of the law and making Mubarak himself subject to the rule of law – and for this, they incurred Mubarak’s vengeance. While at the start of this decade the street movement had the upper hand, by 2006 all eyes had turned to the judges and what some termed the judges uprising or revolution. This moment came to an end with the promulgation of the deformed judges’ law.

5 Fifth signpost: trade union elections and the Mahalla strike of 2006

Egyptian workers were hoping for genuine change in the structure and membership of the government co-opted trade unions, which held

elections from September to November 2006 for the union session of 2006–11 (Khalid 2007a). Yet instead, some 30,000 candidates were disqualified from the elections without legal basis – court orders obtained by workers contesting this move were not implemented – and pro-government forces won all the seats in elections. Within the trade unions, changes in personnel were purely cosmetic.

The working class had faced enormous social oppression, while the official trade unions operated in the interest of government policies at the expense of workers’ rights. At no point did the official unions ever seriously defend these rights. On the contrary, they blessed the sale of the public sector and the elimination of labour on the pretext of restructuring public enterprises from the 1990s onwards. Unions lodged no real objections to the state’s control over pension funds, which reached LE200 billion by 2006, and they ignored the beginning of the application of the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) and its impact on the socioeconomic conditions of workers. Education, health, pharmaceuticals, water, transportation, electricity, telephony and housing were all transformed from rights into commodities, available to anyone who could pay the cost. The official trade unions also ignored the effects of the 2003 floating of the Egyptian pound, which reduced the pound’s purchasing power by some 40 per cent. The Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) and the official syndicates did not oppose these policies and refrained from pressuring the government to adopt any protectionist programmes to support labour economically and socially in the face of these policies.

Workers thus had no choice but to protest, demonstrate, and strike, seeking wage increases, incentive pay and bonuses. For workers, the primary issue was the large gap between wages and prices, the latter of which rose steadily year after year following currency liberalisation and which led to a lowering of their real income by 40 per cent. This background helps explain the increase in labour protests from 2003 to 2004: in

2003, there were 86 such protests, but by 2004, the number had risen to 266. In 2005, 202 labour protests were documented, followed by 222 protests in 2006. Table 1 illustrates the increasing number of protests.

It was thus no surprise that Anwar al-Hawari, the editor-in-chief of *Al-Wafd*, commenting on the labour elections, noted that this was 'the year of the worker'. Public intellectual Tareq Al Bishri criticised the performance of some political forces that did not support workers in their elections and suggested paying closer attention to labour, as a new social indicator that required support. Prior to the elections, the last article that mentioned workers as a sector was published on Labour Day. Written by Ibrahim 'Issa, the editor-in-chief of *Al-Dostor*, it was titled 'Egyptian Workers: Unite and Unify'. In the article 'Issa wondered where workers were and why they remained silent about their miserable social and economic conditions. The article took a blinkered view of labour resistance, and neither 'Issa nor anyone else took note that the labour movement had been on the rise for some years. The public did not see this, as workers had long fallen out of the public consciousness, ignored by the political forces and the press and media (Khalid 2007a).

On 6 December 2006, 25,000 workers at Misr Spinning and Weaving in Mahalla al-Kubra went on strike to protest the failure to disburse the profit shares that workers had been promised during the union elections. Faced with such a large number of strikers, the government yielded to the workers' demands, after initially declaring them illegitimate. The regime's response to labour reflected its panic. It did not give in to their demands voluntarily, but rather was compelled to do so because it did not want another battle on its hands (in particular since several other groups had joined the ranks of dissent including doctors, engineers, teachers and renowned intellectuals and public figures).

The modesty and reasonableness of labour demands won them legitimacy. There are some 104,000 workers in the public textile sector. On average, they demanded LE70–100 in annual profit-sharing dividends – a relatively meagre sum of LE13 million. Meanwhile, the government spent LE500 million renovating ministers' offices (al-Naggar 2007) even as it let the strike in some

factories continue through the ninth day and left other workers on hunger strike. Ultimately, an agreement was reached for a food-stipend increase costing about LE13 million a year (al-Hariri 2007), prompting the workers to end the strike with the feeling that justice had been done.

For the first time in years, labour and the regime had reached a compromise. By the might of pure force, the regime could repress the labour action and use violence, the regime could not be sure how they would react to the use of violence, particularly since labour actions involved large numbers and took place in heavily populated areas.

6 Sixth signpost: rising labour anger, the clash of April 2008

6.1 2007 and rising labour anger

The year 2007 saw 692 labour protests all involving the civil and industrial sectors of the country. Not one day passed in Egypt without at least one labour protest happening (Khalid 2007b). It is important to note that if the textile sector was the engine leading labour protests in early 2006, civil servants and government workers became the fuel of the labour movement in 2007, injecting it with force and vitality. These included: teachers, educational administrators and university professors in the education sector; doctors, nurses, paramedics and health insurance employees in the health sector; railroad and metro-workers in the transportation sector and property-tax collectors in the financial sector. It is important to note that also included were civil servants with al-Azhar, supply and the *waqf* administration; data collectors at the Central Accounting Agency; workers with the revenue department in Alexandria; revenue collectors and cashiers in Asyut; civil servants with the Ministry of Manpower; workers with the Forensic Medicine Department and prosecutors' offices and workers and navigators with the Suez Canal Authority. Despite the diversity of government workers involved, the common nature of their suffering – largely, the gap between wages and prices – was clear. In turn, this diversity highlighted the need for unity and organisation to enable them to achieve their rights in a strategic way, which was encapsulated later in the demand for a minimum wage commensurate with prices to be periodically adjusted to secure a dignified life.

On 3 December 2007, Egypt saw the first labour sit-in in the streets of Cairo. Dubbed the first

'civil servant revolution', the action was organised by property-tax collectors seeking affiliation with the Ministry of Finance instead of municipalities – a sore spot since 1974. While technically they were subordinate to the Finance Ministry, administratively and financially they were municipal employees, which gave them less financial rights than their peers in the general or sales tax administration. Property-tax collectors staged a sit-in in Husayn Higazi Street in front of the Cabinet building, demanding affiliation with the Finance Ministry. The sit-in lasted for 11 days and was only called off after their demands were met.

On the first anniversary of the sit-in, in December 2008 at the Journalists Syndicate, property-tax collectors announced they were forming the first independent trade union in Egypt outside the official union organisation. They filed the registration papers with the Ministry of Manpower in April 2009.

6.2 The April 2008 clash

Egypt entered 2008 with numerous labour victories. Some thought that these strikes were simply spontaneous, unorganised actions, which proved to be an erroneous analysis (Khalid 2007b). The fact that the labour movement was not controlled by a party did not mean it was not organised. The movement used tools and mechanisms characterised by a high degree of organisation and diversity emanating from the experience of the Egyptian labour movement over its long history. These mechanisms ranged from deception to concession, and involved a distribution of roles and various forms of strikes and solidarity. Most importantly, the movement brought a new kind of experiment to the Egyptian scene, missing from labour history since the 1994 strike in Kafr al-Dawwar.

The success of the labour strikes had significant social repercussions, and the strike became the readiest weapon used by social and demand-based movements.³

This labour ferment and its successes invigorated Egyptian society, giving it self-confidence and fortitude. The strike was not simply a means of expression and a declaration of demands but was, from the first moment, a means of pressure whereby the end of the strike was strongly linked to the realisation of demands. It broke all the

legislative, political and security constraints impeding the Egyptian social mobilisation.

All of this fostered an attempt to cleave to the labour movement, support it, advance it or advance other demands on its shoulders. Thus, no sooner had workers in Mahalla al-Kubra announced their intention to strike on 6 April 2008 if the government did not meet their demands (the dismissal of the CEO of the company, the revocation of arbitrary decisions and an increase in some financial benefits), political forces declared their support for Mahalla workers. *Kifaya* sent out an appeal asking its activists to demonstrate in every governorate in support of the workers, and a youth group propagated a campaign on blogs and Facebook asking Egyptians to stay at home on that day in solidarity with the textile workers. These appeals were heard throughout the country, prompting the Interior Ministry to issue a statement on 5 April 2008 demanding that all citizens go to work and reject the call to stay at home, demonstrate in the street or stage workplace strikes. The Interior Ministry drafted a security plan to seize control of the Mahalla factory to end the strike action, and from the early hours of 6 April, the factory was turned into a military barracks. Security forces were deployed in all factory floors and worker buses. Although security did indeed manage to thwart the strike, it was surprised by a forceful response to the stay-at-home campaign in Cairo and Giza that exceeded all expectations. Demonstrations were also held in eight governorates: Cairo, Giza, Kafr al-Shaykh, Daqahliya, Alexandria, Buhayra, Gharbiya and Qalyubiya but were contained, with the exception of those in Mahalla. In Mahalla, virtually the entire town took to the streets. Residents clashed with police forces, supported by reinforcements from nearby governorates. It was the first time that posters bearing Mubarak's name and image were torn down, ripped up, torched and stomped upon because of domestic demands rather than in connection with Palestine or Iraq. The police fired live ammunition on demonstrators, killing three young men and injuring dozens. They incarcerated nearly 1,000 residents. The city was put under siege and a three-day curfew was declared.

Despite the difficulty of 2008 for workers, it did see a notable victory when property-tax collectors announced their intention to form an independent

union. This move, which led the labour movement to reclaim its right to organise, was a long-sought victory by the Egyptian working class. In addition, the youth groups, that had called for solidarity with the workers, announced the formation of a youth organisation called 'April 6th', in recognition and commemoration of that day.

Thus, the year ended with two new organisations: a youth group and a labour group, who joined other forces opposed to Mubarak and his regime.

7 Seventh signpost: people protests

7.1 Protests of thirst

On 3 July 2007, some 3,000 citizens from Burg al-Burullus in the governorate of Kafr al-Shaykh in the northern Delta came out to protest against a more than 20-day interruption of potable water service; the water had been diverted to the Baltim resort to meet the 24-hour needs of holidaymakers! After one extended demonstration, locals cut off the international coastal road, located on the Mediterranean coast, causing a 14-hour traffic jam that stretched over some 80 km, and chanted slogans against the governor General Salah Salama, the former head of State Security Investigations – demanding his removal and blaming him for the water crisis. By 29 July 2007, the water crisis had spread to several governorates, including Cairo, Giza, Daqahliya, Gharbiya, Minya, Kafr al-Shaykh, Qalyubiya, Fayum and Manufiya, to the indignation of citizens who had no access to water in the simmering heat of Egyptian summers. Others in Marg (a district of northern Cairo) blocked the road to a cavalcade that included three ministers, among them the minister of housing. Residents of Faysal and the Pyramids area threatened to block the Ring Road, while in Daqahliya, the thirsty refused to break up their sit-in and demanded that President Mubarak himself visit them.

Some protestors even gathered in front of the Journalists Syndicate to demand that those responsible be held to account and accused the government of neglecting the demands and vital needs of the citizenry.⁴ In several cities and regions that saw interruptions to the water supply, black markets in water emerged and citizens scuffled to obtain their needs.

The water demonstrations surprised the cultural elite, the intelligentsia, who had not imagined

that there were non-labour social sectors still able to protest. Yet, here they were faced with what looked like a broad civil disobedience movement led by farmers, the socially excluded and the destitute, from whom for years the government had denied one of their most basic rights to life: the right to clean drinking water. The thirsty had exhausted all other means of complaint and appeal.⁵

Commenting on the water demonstrations, Dr 'Asim al-Dassuqi, a professor of contemporary history, noted, 'The popular protest Egypt is now witnessing a state of general desperation among the Egyptian people because of a government that has pursued a free-market policy and left people to the vagaries of supply and demand... [and] leaving the people to businessmen and investors with no intervention to protect their rights'.⁶

Dr 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Masiri (a renowned intellectual) believed that 'these events are a rebellion against the ruler, [representing] a disorganised revolution'. He said that the government was resorting to a strategy of limited fire fighting, although the conflagration continued to blaze and increase whenever the opportunity arose. Dr al-Masiri warned that these protest movements might lead to something like events in Europe in the Middle Ages, when famine spread and the poor began to kill the rich and plunder their wealth to stave off hunger.⁷

Dr Mahmud Nur Farahat, a professor of the philosophy of law, noted that the 'rebellion of the thirsty' was evidence of the failure of the bloated local administration in Egypt and the services it oversees, to provide one of the most basic amenities: water. He said that municipal administrations all over Egypt were awash with inefficiency and neglect and were not performing their duties:

It's outrageous to see millions of Egyptians without clean drinking water in the 21st century. If they can find it one hour, they still need to search for it the rest of the day, and if they have it for one day, they are denied it for the rest of the week. How can you ask farmers who cannot even slake their thirst to sow the land and bring us crops sufficient to meet the country's needs?⁸

Table 2 Documented labour protests (1999–2010)

Year	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Number of protests	164	135	138	96	86	266	202	222	692	447	478	530

7.2 Protests for subsidised flour and bread

Just as they were the first to protest the water shortage in 2007, the residents of Burg al-Burullus turned out again on 7 June 2008, to protest against being denied subsidised flour and bread. Again they blocked the coastal road to protest their deprivation.

The governor of Kafr al-Shaykh, Ahmad Zaki ‘Abdidin,⁹ issued orders abolishing the quota of subsidised flour given to grain storehouses and transferring it directly to bakeries, in order to prevent the flour being sold on the black market. As usual, the governor simply gestured from his office in the governorate building that starting from such-and-such date, this decision would be implemented, with no social debate to clarify the reasons and justifications for the decision, or even to discuss alternatives. The new governor was apparently unaware that his predecessor, Salah Salama, was removed from his post, thanks to the water protests by residents of the same village in 2007. ‘Abdidin did not discuss the decision with local residents, even though nearly 90 per cent of them work in fishing and depend on subsidised flour to make the bread they rely on in the off-season. He also forgot that his decision came at a time when local residents were prohibited from fishing. The General Agency for Fisheries requires fishers to suspend their activities for more than two months, ostensibly to protect fisheries.¹⁰

On 15 and 16 March 2008, large popular demonstrations erupted in front of the governorate building in Fayum. Hundreds of rural women from nearby villages came to protest the failure to distribute their monthly flour allowance and the absence of bread, after the owners of bakeries sold the flour on the black market with the full knowledge of officials.¹¹

The same crisis was seen in several other governorates, giving rise to a bread shortage. Of course, this led to fights among citizens and bakery owners and some citizens were killed. The crisis was only resolved when Mubarak ordered the army to produce bread and set-up kiosks for distribution.

7.3 Butane crisis

In late February 2010, the butane crisis erupted. Many Egyptians had difficulty in finding butane canisters, and the price per canister reached LE35 in some areas, although the real cost should have been no more than LE3. The crisis was not localised but spread throughout various governorates, with the price of butane canisters varying according to area. The lines shifted from in front of the warehouses – which gave preferential treatment to butane sellers over citizens in order to increase profits – to the homes of known butane sellers.

8 Eighth signpost: 2010, the year of confrontation

8.1 The death of Khaled Said

Khaled Muhammad Said Subhi Qasim (27 January 1982–6 June 2010) was a 28-year-old Egyptian from Alexandria who was tortured to death by two police detectives after he uploaded a video online documenting an officer and the two detectives dividing hashish (a drug like marijuana) and money seized in a drug bust.¹² The two detectives beat him to death in front of several eyewitnesses in the Sidi Gabir neighbourhood. Said’s death sparked public protests in Alexandria, Cairo and some governorates. The Mubarak regime attempted to contain the situation by spreading rumours about Said and his death, claiming that he swallowed a packet of marijuana, on which he choked – a lie also included in the coroner’s report. Protests and youth activities were organised in defence of Said, and a Facebook page (‘We are all Khaled Said’) was established in his name that attracted hundreds of thousands of members interested in resisting the oppression and injustice that had brought the country to this state.

8.2 Reinvigoration of the labour movement

At the same time, the labour movement regained its vitality and protest force. Labour protests saw clashes between workers and police after workers managed to embarrass the regime and move most of their demonstrations and sit-ins to: the Ministry of Manpower, the ETUF headquarters, the Cabinet building, the Ministry of Education,

the Ministry of Local Development, the People's Assembly and Shura Council and the Public Prosecutor's Office. These sit-ins lasted nearly ten months. Table 2 illustrates the frequency of labour protests from 1999 to 2010.

9 Ninth signpost: Two Saints Church and the Tunisian revolution

The final 'signpost' during Mubarak's rule came in January 2011. On Christmas Eve, the Two Saints Church in Alexandria was bombed, killing dozens and reopening deep sectarian wounds, already a ticking bomb liable to explode at the slightest provocation. As usual, official statements alluded to 'hidden hands' from abroad. All media were banned from the site, and security campaigns were set in motion that struck terror into everyone and fostered silence in fear of police power. It was at this time that Sayyid Bilal was tortured to death by State Security personnel.

Political forces staged demonstrations in Shubra al-Khayma demanding the truth, and several young people were arrested and charged with inciting sectarian strife. It became clear to all that this was a regime that not only lacked competence, but was also irrational enough to arrest young people on charges of fomenting strife after they demonstrated in rejection of sectarianism and all discrimination against *Copts* (native Egyptian Christians).

Indeed, many felt there was a relationship between the succession plan and the church bombing. The question was whether the event would be used to increase the scope of repression and quash liberties, purportedly to quell civil strife, until the succession plan was implemented.

It was a question looking for an answer, and for the next two weeks, all social forces looked for a lifeline to save the country from what was coming. The first hints of salvation came from Tunisia when Zine El Abidine fled the country, a victory which revived Egyptians' hope. Youth forces seized on this moment by turning a call for demonstrations on 25 January – Police Day – to protest against the police into the date of the Egyptian revolution. Meanwhile, the well-established party forces assumed their usual rejectionist stance. The Egyptian street responded to the appeal, and thousands took to the streets on 25 January, followed by millions on

28 January, ultimately bringing down Mubarak and his clique.

10 Conclusion

Looking more closely at these important turning points helps to clarify the links between Egyptian protests prior to the January 25th revolution. Were it not for these protests, the revolution would not have succeeded. The protests functioned as a political incubator that nurtured the forces of the revolution, shaping their political and organisational consciousness and from which several conclusions can be drawn.

First, most, if not all, political forces described and analysed Egyptian movements and protests in conventional terms, consistently focusing on the major movements and on the explicitly political, ignoring smaller protests and especially those staged by marginalised groups in defence of their basic demands. Before the Mahalla strike in December 2006, neither political forces nor the social and cultural elite paid attention to working-class movements, which began to gain steam in 2004 and reached their peak in the trade union elections from August to November 2006. For them, the Mahalla action of 6 December 2006 came as a shock.

Similarly, protests by the poor over housing, forced displacement, irrigation or potable water, butane and bread and flour did not garner the attention they deserved. Instead, they were the focus of scant media coverage wrapped in political sloganeering by some parties, which faded as soon as the government offered some partial solution or sedative. Meanwhile, everyone ignored basic questions: What are these protests? Why and how did they emerge? This same neglect was shown towards the torture of the marginalised and the poor in police stations, whether in cities or hamlets in the Delta and Upper Egypt.

It is the author's belief that the description, examination and analysis of these protests would have revealed a rising social resistance, and, of course, they were highly indicative of the conflicting relationship between these groups and the ruling authority.

Second, Egyptian protests of recent years revealed a diverse array of tools of protest and resistance, with many employing non-traditional methods. Protests against the siege on Gaza

were not limited to demonstrations; through the Popular Committee, Egyptians collected food, medicine and clothes and sent them to the Egyptian–Palestinian border in people-organised convoys. The movement of these convoys from the provinces to Arish and Rafah constituted a challenge not only to the Israeli siege, but also to the Mubarak regime and its security policies.

Workers were also creative in the form and places of their protests. Workplace labour protests are a well-known tactic, but Egyptian workers took their protests and sit-ins to the spaces symbolic of decision-makers' powers: to ministries, government agencies, the People's Assembly (parliament) and Shura Council, the Cabinet building and the pro-NDP ETUF – where they camped out for more than 20 days. Workers organised mock funerals and removed their clothes, writing their demands on their bodies. They were sometimes accompanied by their wives and children and were often led by women. They carried empty pots to illustrate their poverty and want, banged drums and used whistles to raise the alarm.

Egyptian youth made creative use of mobile phones, blogs, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and other social communication tools (see Ezbawy, this *IDS Bulletin*). The stay-at-home campaign of 6 April 2008, was perhaps the public declaration that armies of bloggers and young people had joined the battle against the regime. These tools were long belittled as a virtual struggle in a virtual world with no connection to reality, while the success of the April 6th uprising was seen as a coincidence, difficult to repeat. Everyone discovered how wrong they had been on the morning of 25 January.

Third, it was not only political forces that failed to accurately assess and analyse Egyptians' protests, but also the regime and its political and security arms. The same outdated framework for engaging with citizen agency guided the thinking and response of political forces and age-old parties.

Fourth, the Egyptian protests that were crowned by the 'revolution of January 25th' swept away

numerous stock theories about how the masses protest or make a revolution, particularly institutional and organisational theories that posit the need for a large, strong organisational structure for any revolution to occur. In contrast, events showed that the important point is action taken by the people (the interest group) on a demand regardless of anyone else's assessment or view of the demand. Demands that seem simple to politicians, analysts or even regular citizens may, to those who make them, be demands worth dying for. The demands of the property-tax collectors were merely administrative demands that would win them some financial benefit by affiliating them to the Finance Ministry instead of municipal administrations. Yet their success in securing those basic rights prompted them to examine the reasons, and they arrived at the conclusion that it was because they acted collectively and sought out a mechanism that would maintain this collectivism. This gave birth to their establishment of the first independent trade union for Egyptian workers since the 1960s.

Hence, the above challenges us to reassess Egyptian activism in the past decade and to evaluate and analyse the revolution that swept away outdated theories and exposed new, simple tools of struggle that do not necessarily require an overarching, strong organisation or inspiring leader, as much as they need the faith of the interest group in their demands and action to achieve them, no matter how simple. I believe the first step in this reassessment must be to abandon all condescending attitudes towards basic human demands, whatever the social status of the claimants.

Egyptians' protests and their resistance to injustice and oppression that led to the revolution were not grounded in major political organisations or popular movements based on grand historical theories. Nor were they spontaneous gusts that took random actions that just happened to succeed; rather, they indicate an awareness, an organisation, a use of unconventional approaches that does not fit within narrow frameworks of interpreting reality.

Notes

- 1 A paper published on the website of the Center for Socialist Studies.
- 2 Only once or twice had judges been personally assaulted and even then as individuals, such as the assault on al-Sanhuri in the State Council in 1954.
- 3 *Al-Wafd*, 28 February 2007: 2.
- 4 *Nahdat Misr*, 30 July 2007.
- 5 *Al-Masry al-Youm*, 22 July 2007.
- 6 *Al-Masry al-Youm*, 22 July 2007.
- 7 *Al-Masry al-Youm*, 22 July 2007.
- 8 *Al-Masry al-Youm*, 22 July 2007.
- 9 A former general with State Security Investigations.
- 10 Burullus leader Ra'uf al-'Ubaydi said, in a panel organised by the Liberties Committee at the Journalists Syndicate, entitled 'What is Happening in Burullus?' on 17 June, 'A 10-kilo sack of flour for LE7 is the only guaranteed food. Blocking the road because of the water problem caused grave losses. They wouldn't have let us do that again. But even if they block all legitimate channels, we'll dig tunnels underground. We have legitimate, legal motivations'.

References

- al-Hariri, Tariq (2007) 'Strikes by Textile Workers Confirm Wage Distortions in Egypt' [in Arabic], *Al-Masry al-Youm*, 12 February: 6
- al-Naggar, Shahinaz (2007) 'Shahinaz al-Naggar Questions the Government in the People's Assembly' [in Arabic], *Al-Masry al-Youm*, 26 February: 3
- al-Shahat, A. (2006) 'Judges and the Battle to Bring down the Dictator' [in Arabic],

- 11 The website 'Al-Kushuf' reported on 17 March 2008, that Magda Ahmad, from Ma'sara Sawi, said, 'Supply inspectors attacked and beat us and told us, "Go and wet your ration cards and drink the water you can squeeze out of them." Then they threw them in our faces'. Muhammad 'Ali Mahmud from the district of Tamiya said that the governor of Fayum 'turned over the necks of citizens' to the owners of bakeries, while he was busy with parties and banquets with guests and senior officials. Suhayr Ibrahim said, 'We want to eat. We only have ten rounds of bread a day and we stand for hours at the bakery to get them. Meanwhile, local flour is being sold right in front of us with the knowledge of the supply directorate. The price has reached LE400.' 'Abdullah Ahmad complained about the poor quality of the bread and the shortage at the bakeries saying, 'Our children went to school without eating. A kilo of pasta costs LE5 and the governor is living in another world'.
- 12 The video uploaded by Khaled Said can be seen at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=SJDbTeynrJ0

www.e-socialists.net/node/4430 (accessed 4 November 2011)

- Khalid, 'Ali (2007a) *Workers and Social Resistance* [in Arabic], Cairo: Hisham Mubarak Law Center
- Khalid 'Ali (2007b) *Adil William, and Mahmud al-Mansi, Workers and Social Resistance* [in Arabic], Part 2, Cairo: Hisham Mubarak Law Center and Awlad al-Ard for Human Rights