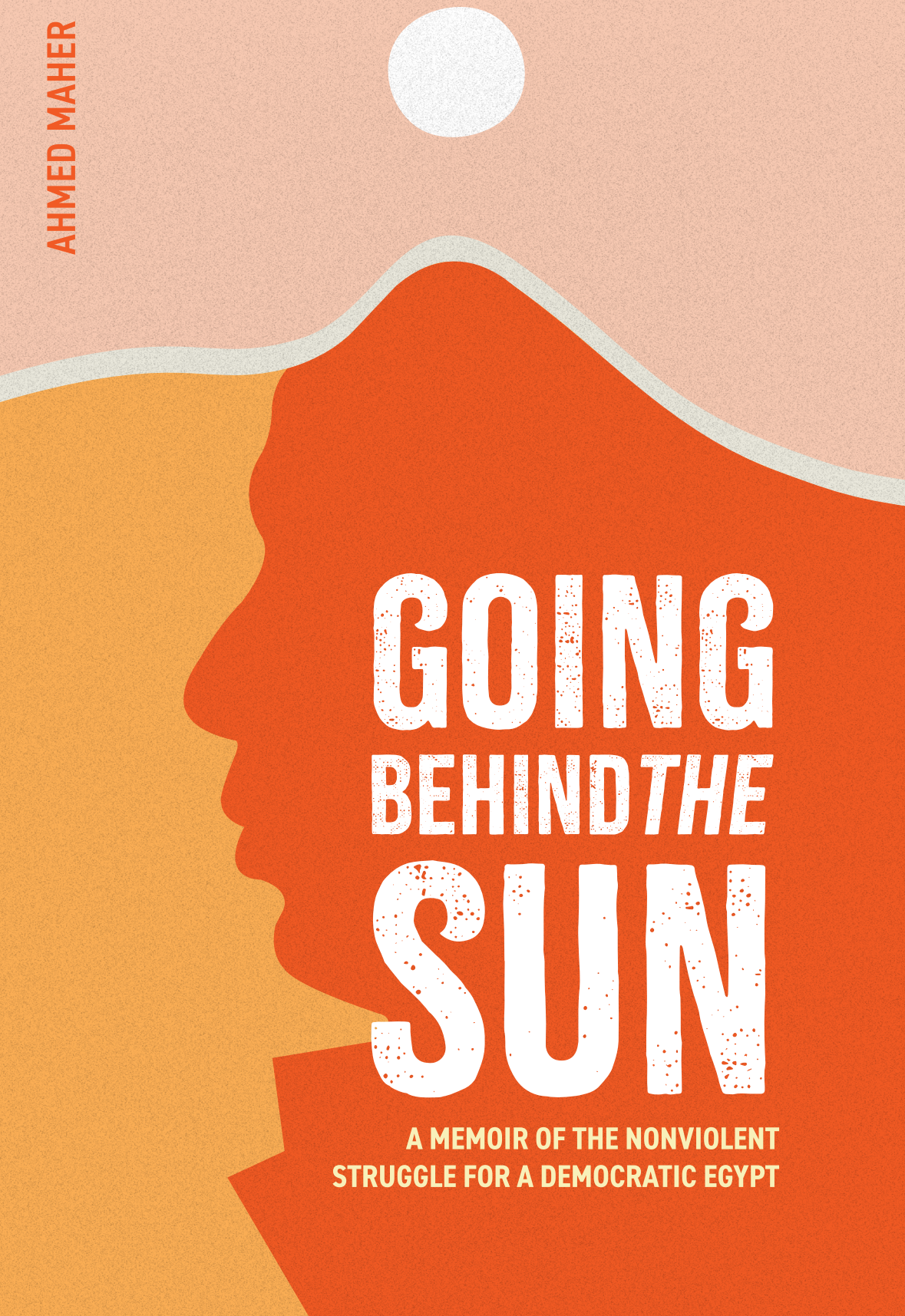
AHMED MAHER



GOING BEHIND *THE* SUN

A MEMOIR OF THE NONVIOLENT STRUGGLE FOR A DEMOCRATIC EGYPT

Praise for Going Behind the Sun

"I could not put Going Behind the Sun down. It is more than a memoir of the Egyptian revolution. It is a personal, intimate, honest, and deeply human account of what it means to organize, resist, sacrifice, and remain committed to nonviolence when hope gives way to repression. Ahmed Maher does not simply celebrate the courage that brought millions into the streets. He courageously examines the divisions, miscalculations, and difficult choices that allowed authoritarianism to return. Written by someone who did not observe history from a distance, but helped shape it and paid a profound personal price, this book is a powerful reminder that removing a dictator is only the beginning, and that the deeper work of building democracy, civil society, and a culture of nonviolence is as difficult a process as the revolution itself."

—Sami Awad, Palestinian activist, author, and Co-Director of Nonviolence International

"Maher skillfully chronicles a lifetime of courage, resolve, and sacrifice that helped change Egypt, the broader Middle East, and the world in unprecedented ways.

The story of the organization he formed, April 6th, and the rise and demise of Egypt's failed uprising are woven into every detail of this biography. Surprisingly, the story remains profoundly human in every aspect, as Maher brings his family and friends around the world into his journey. What remains throughout is the unrelenting and inspiring spirit of steady growth, cross-border solidarity, and long-term resilience of one of Egypt's leading organizers—and the hopes and dreams of a global movement for freedom over the past generation."

—Sherif Mansour, Co-Founder, Janoub Group

“Revolutions are like paragliding: taking off requires courage, but surviving the changing winds requires learning, adaptation, and an unwavering sense of direction. Ahmed Maher gives us the rare story of both—the exhilaration of challenging the impossible and the difficult lessons of what comes after.”
—Abir Haj Ibrahim, co-founder of Mobaderoon; 2023 Women Building Peace Award finalist

“Those distraught by democratic backsliding globally will take heart from this book. Ahmed Maher gives voice to a generation of youth who set Egypt and the rest of the Arab world on fire a decade and a half ago. Their story of courage and commitment gives proof positive that the quest for democratic freedoms and social and economic justice, while deferred, continues to smolder.”
—James Gelvin, Professor of Modern Middle Eastern History at UCLA, Author of *The Arab Uprisings*

“Ahmed Maher did not merely witness history—he helped to make it. His courage helped change Egypt forever, by awakening a generation, challenging a dictatorship, and reminding the world that ordinary citizens possess the power to change history. His book is a profoundly moving memoir of his personal journey, and an inspiration to us all to continue to resist.”
—Holt McCallany, actor

GOING BEHIND *THE* SUN

A MEMOIR OF THE NONVIOLENT STRUGGLE FOR A DEMOCRATIC EGYPT

AHMED MAHER

People Power Publishers

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Dedicated to the souls of my mother and father,
who played the greatest role in my life.
I wish they could have been with me at this moment.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Making of an Organizer

Stay away from politics; be a normal person," my mother would say to me. She feared for me because she knew what happened to activists. She begged me to stop. She begged, as most mothers would, driven by her desire to keep me safe. She was afraid that I would be arrested or simply disappear, colloquially known in Egypt as "going behind the sun." I was arrested, but I did not disappear. This is my story. A story shared by Egyptians who fight for the right to think, the right to express themselves. I hope that one day my children will learn about our nonviolent revolution and choose to complete the missions we started. I hope one day they will bear witness to an Egypt we have dreamt of.

Childhood and Early Youth

I was born on December 2, 1980, in Alexandria, Egypt. Ten months later, Islamist militant soldiers opened fire on a military parade, killing President Anwar Sadat and injuring then Vice-President Hosni Mubarak. Eight days after Sadat's assassination, Mubarak became the President of Egypt and imposed an Emergency Law that lasted until May 31, 2012—the entirety of my youth and young adult life.

My father worked as a technician in a car factory and my mother was a special education teacher, working with physically and mentally disabled kids in a private Islamic school. When I was five years old, my family moved to Cairo, and we began visiting Alexandria each summer. During my early years, we did not experience economic hardships or trouble with



Ahmed in Grade 4, 1989.

law enforcement, but systemic injustice in Egypt was never farther than a neighbor or an old friend of the family. We were accustomed to stories of injustice, humiliation, torture, and corruption. However, what we saw in the media was different. The newspapers and television told us Egypt was righteous, victorious, honorable and prosperous; they were propaganda wings of the government.

My parents often talked about how Egypt was in the 1940s and 50s, when political life and demonstrations were not uncommon. I grew up watching films from those decades that left a lasting impression on me. *There is A Man in Our House* tells the story of life under occupation and resistance against repressive authority. Omar Sharif plays the character of

Ibrahim, who organizes a demonstration that is met by violence from the police. Ibrahim responds by assassinating the prime minister and is forced into hiding. Although I was disturbed by the assassination, Ibrahim's courage and spirit to resist stuck with me. I began to question why my countrymen did not mount an organized opposition. Though not suffering to the same extreme as the characters in this film, Egyptian people were undoubtedly oppressed and marginalized.

Books were always encouraged in our home, and as a child, I preferred reading to sports. I would spend hours lost in *The Adventures of Tintin* and Mickey Mouse, or "Miki" as he's known to Egyptians. At family gatherings, I gravitated toward the elders telling stories of the past. When I was seven years old, I grew increasingly fascinated by ants. I spent hours studying slow brown ants and fast black ants around the house. As I put them together in a terrarium, the black ants did not bite me while the brown ants bit me a lot. At first, I thought the black ants were more peaceful, but as time passed, I observed that the black ants would band into small packs and kill all the brown ants when threatened. I also noticed that the ants were trying to escape. Since I did not want them to leave, I built a small moat of water around their miniature world. The ants would come to the edge of the water and attempt to free themselves. However, with no escape they would eventually give up and return to the terrarium. Soon, the ants accepted their artificial new home and its boundaries. They had been tamed to follow the rules of their terrarium.

Humans, like ants, can be brought into submission. Their free will can be taken away. Egyptian authorities have the power to suppress and humiliate their citizens that want to escape the circumstances they find themselves living in. The self-proclaimed sovereign punishes and tortures the non-cooperative. The state has the training and power to exact great pain and to instill numbing powerlessness upon the people. Conditions that would normally seem extraordinary—those in which citizens are deprived of their freedom and dignity—begin to seem ordinary. The Egyptian masses have been trained to live their lives like the ants in the terrarium. But as events later proved, this control of the Egyptian government over its own people was an illusion that was maintained only as long as people cooperated and obeyed.

Where books first awakened my moral imagination, film expanded it—revealing how ordinary people navigate the forces that shape their destinies and offering mirrors that reflect how communities confront power, reclaim dignity, and forge paths toward justice. I was deeply influenced by *The Second Wife*, a film about a poor woman, Fatima, who is taken advantage of by a powerful mayor in a small, Egyptian village. The mayor's wife could not bear children, so he forces Fatima to divorce the man she loves and become his second wife. The mayor has a history of self-enrichment at the expense of the villagers and is enabled by a corrupt imam. Fatima bears the child of her previous husband and confronts the power structure head-on. She leads a grassroots revolution which helps the villagers retake their property and profits. This story made me think about equitable redistribution of property and land. The message was inescapable: if people stand up collectively against an unjust authority, they can win.

In my late teenage years, I was profoundly impacted by *Gandhi*, a Richard Attenborough film. My heart was stirred by the Indians who led the peaceful protests against the British occupation. It was the first time I considered nonviolent resistance as a tactic of struggle. The idea of peaceful protest had been unknown to me. However, for the Indians, it was a critical turning point in their struggle against the British Empire. It was then that I fully understood the strength of peaceful protest.

In 2002, I watched *Michael Collins*, another film that changed my concept of common cause, loyalty, and brotherhood. I grieved when Collins's group split over their different opinions about the Anglo–Irish Treaty, a disagreement which resulted in Collins's death. It helped me understand that a difference of opinion between old friends can lead to conflict, which in turn can lead to a desire for revenge.

There are several anthems, including some that we sang along to in our college days, that ignited a reverence for our Arab identity. "Our Greatest Homeland" from 1960 and "The Arab Dream" from 1998 were very emotional.[1] "Our Greatest Homeland" reflected Nasser's Arab nationalism, filled with film footage of Arab victories and proud events. On the other hand, "The Arab Dream" criticized Arab military weakness and geopolitical defeats. As the melancholic tune of the song filled the

air, our domestic economic hardships and lack of political freedom were overshadowed by our united opposition against the West.

I formed my first political opinions while I was at the Faculty of Engineering at Shoubra, Benha University.* We, along with the whole Arab world, were listening to "The Arab Dream," in which the crying singers made the Arab world cry along with them. A united Arab world was the dream of Arab nationalism. However, as I matured, I began to understand that Arab nationalism was nothing but a romanticized notion with ideas that closely resembled fascism. Arab nationalism, like fascism, called for political strongmen; it enabled authoritarian leaders to carry the mantle of leading their people to Arab greatness, thereby justifying oppression.

One of my favorite books is *City of Love and Ashes* by Yusuf Idris.† It tells the story of the Egyptian people's struggle against colonialism and juxtaposes it with the love between a young man and woman. The book demonstrates that suffering is necessary in order to achieve independence. Here, Hamza, the protagonist, voices his experience of demonstrations:

> *All the suit-wearers disappeared when things turned serious. And do you know who remained standing in the square, with bullets coming from all directions? Those boys who appear to have no families, no clothes, no trade. Young kids no older than 15. Dark, dusty and ragged-clothed. Yes, it was the so-called riffraff who stayed on.*[2]

His words echo our later experience in Tahrir Square. His words ring true in my ear even today.

Awakening: A Critical Look at One's History

The Egyptian government governs its people without being beholden to them. I ask myself why we as humans allow ourselves to be manipulated like livestock? In order to satisfy our need to feel protected, we are willing to give up our autonomy, dignity, and freedom.

We were taught in school that Nasser's coup d'état on July 23, 1952,

* Affiliated with Banha University, Faculty of Engineering. Banha is a city in a governorate called "El Qalyubia" in Northern Cairo.

† "City of Love and Ashes" was the basis for a 1943 film "No Time For Love."

saved Egypt from poverty and British colonialism. In the 1950s and 1960s, Nasser enjoyed great popularity for a long period as he gained the support of workers like my father, who was employed by the state-owned El-Nasr car factory, built in 1960, which produced licensed Fiat and Zestava vehicles. Nasser promised workers safe working conditions and guaranteed pay, and provided a social safety net. Families at that time were granted free education and healthcare. Individuals could overcome poverty through hard work, and people could expect their children's lives would be better than their own. Nasser inspired Arabs to dream of a unified Arab nation and saw himself as its leader.

With time and experience, I became more critical of the past "achievements" that Egyptian leaders like Nasser claimed to deliver. I began to see flaws in the pro-Nasser narrative. Many of Nasser's great projects did not improve the lives of Egyptians as a whole nor did they stimulate Egypt's growth as portrayed by the media or as taught in school. Egypt's public education system appeared to be an extension of the web of state propaganda. Nasser ignored democracy. He did not establish political parties, organizations, or unions. I had viewed Nasser as a great hero based on my father's accounts, when in fact, he was at the helm of creating oppressive institutions—those that plague Egypt to the present day. Under Nasser, civil society atrophied while despotism, torture, and disinformation strengthened, proliferated, and normalized.

In 1967, Israel wiped out the Egyptian Air Force overnight and Nasser lost the Sinai Peninsula to Israel, shattering the dream of Arab nationalism. Nasser became the emperor without clothes. He was fallible. Egypt's defeat was partly the product of a system of cronyism instead of meritocracy, and the lack of democratic accountability. All power fell under Nasser and his handpicked officers who got caught flat-footed, were underprepared, and grossly underestimated Israel's capabilities. Nepotism and cronyism at a national level undermined performance by allowing mediocrity to thrive, suppressing constructive criticism, and promoting individuals based on connections rather than ability to lead or fight courageously. In the Nasser system, merit lost out to informal patronage and advancement based on loyalty and secrecy. As criticism mounted, show trials were held to punish those seemingly responsible for the war

and defeat, and no justice was imparted. In response, demonstrations exploded on the streets against the regime in 1968. Nasser died in 1970, and "left" Egypt to Anwar Sadat in an attempt to secure his legacy that would perpetuate corruption, cronyism, and repression. The appointment of Sadat left many Egyptians feeling left out from the process of selecting their political leader.

Sadat was known as 'The Believer,' a man of Islam. He was also deemed a weak Nasserist puppet. To better his reputation, Sadat arrested his opponents and charged them with treason. He rolled back many of Nasser's socialist policies, including workers' welfare privileges. Sadat, and then Mubarak, continued in opacity, setting in motion a pattern of shadowy privatization and crony capitalism that cultivated loyalty among the elite. Sadat also claimed that he would usher in a new era of democracy by dismantling prisons and burning secret recordings of political opponents gathered by Security Services under Nasser. However, he soon began surveilling, arresting, and jailing people. In 1977, food prices soared and students who had protested under Nasser began to mobilize again. During September 1981, Sadat arrested a majority of these activists in a sweeping crackdown that included 1,500 religious dissidents and political opponents. Sadat's National Democratic Party established full control over every part of Egyptian political life.

Sadat chose a malleable, mid-level military officer named Hosni Mubarak to be his successor. Following Sadat's assassination in 1981, the Egyptian people feared radicalism and favored stability. They were inclined to accept Mubarak, who they thought would protect the nation. Sadat and Mubarak eliminated progressive policies that had afforded my family some sense of economic security. When I was almost eleven years old, people around me were criticizing Mubarak's decision to join the coalition to liberate Kuwait from Iraq in 1991. These critical voices came primarily from Islamists, Communists, and Nasserists. Mubarak crushed these voices and banned opposition parties. While his rhetoric was filled with talk of liberal and democratic reform, it was plainly for the consumption of those outside Egypt.

The experience of the Egyptians during the 30 years under Mubarak, from 1981 to 2011, left a profound impact on the psyche of Egyptians. I

personally began to criticize Mubarak during my secondary school years in the mid-90s when I saw Egyptians imprisoned for their political views. During this time, Egyptian families began to bear the brunt of high prices and rampant corruption. Egypt's problems with education, health, and security were all rooted in Mubarak's—and his predecessors'—centralized and tyrannical system of decision-making.

Geopolitics, Terrorism and Regime Repression

In 1997, there were deadly terrorist attacks which began to reshape the discourse in Egyptian society. The Islamist group Al-Gama'a Al-Islamiyya planned an ambush that killed 58 tourists and four Egyptians outside the Valley of Kings in Luxor. Government officials called it "the deadliest attack by Islamic militants in their five-year campaign to overthrow the Egyptian Government."[3] Al-Gama'a Al-Islamiyya was dedicated to overthrowing Mubarak and establishing an Islamic state. The terrorist attacks unified Egyptians behind Mubarak. Mubarak's state was vehemently against Islamist groups, and the people were prepared to defend the government's anti-Islamist narrative during the late 1990s.

Mubarak's public support began waning in the early 2000s. Articles in several independent newspapers began to highlight the failure of the regime to address the growing threat of terrorism. These critiques affirmed that segments of the population were radicalized as a result of abuse and torture inflicted by the government on the streets and in prisons. People began to think more carefully about the root causes of radicalization and measures that could mitigate them. After the 9/11 attacks, *Al-Ahram*, a state-owned newspaper in Egypt that my father would bring home and read, began publishing translated articles from foreign media outlets such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. It also published articles by prolific Egyptian journalists, such as Mohamed Hassanein Heikal and Naguib Mahfouz, commenting on the relationship between despotism and terrorism. People were echoing the words of George W. Bush about how the lack of democracy in the Arab world leads to terrorism and generates a vicious cycle of violence. It was ironic that the United States. then invaded Iraq to try to establish democracy with the use of violent force. The belief that democracy could be built by violent

means and spearheaded by foreign powers with little backlash from the local population unsettled me deeply.

In 2003, George W. Bush ordered a U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and ran intelligence operations out of Egypt. In response, Egyptians across the political spectrum began to protest, labeling Mubarak as being too close to the United States. These first major public protests against Mubarak resulted in the government introducing reforms that we thought would be substantive. However, Mubarak's plan was to use them as a pretext to place his son Gamal Mubarak—who joined the National Democratic Party (NDP) in 2000—into a key government post. Ultimately, only cosmetic changes were made that did not affect Mubarak's grip on power. He appointed Gamal to the third-most powerful position within the NDP, that of the General Secretary of the Policy Committee, which oversaw most of the government's activities. These steps seemed eerily similar to the transfer of power that took place in Syria leading to the ascendance of Bashar al-Assad as the de facto ruler in 2000.

In the 2000s, terrorist attacks across the country became more frequent as innocent Egyptians and foreigners were targeted indiscriminately. My country was being destabilized. As I read more, I was motivated to understand the relation between regime repression and radicalization, and the connection of despotism to terrorism. It became apparent that the government's policy of jailing Islamists or anyone based solely on their political or religious affiliation made the country less secure for everybody.

Kefaya and Youth for Change: How I And Others Became a Target of the State

Egypt is a nation that prides itself on its history, faith, community, art, and beauty. Egyptians have taught me that progress can be made without violence. We have engaged in hunger strikes, noncooperation, illegal writing, and dissemination of banned literature to throw sand in the gears of the oppressive regimes.

The Egyptian Movement for Change (EMC) is popularly known by its Arabic slogan "*Kefaya*," meaning "Enough." It emerged in 2004, when Egyptians stemming from various backgrounds united formally in their opposition to President Mubarak's grip on power. It was the first such

awakening since the 1960s led mainly by intellectuals. Young activists of the 1970s were now in their 50s and 60s, and they became the leaders of Kefaya. George Isaac was Kefaya's first coordinator. He was part of the National Council on Human Rights. Professor Abdel Wahab El-Messiri, who was also part of Kefaya, articulated the notion of "semi-secular" governance. Ideas of secularism were ushered in by the West, and its conflict with the conservative, religious ideological entrenchment could be tackled through a compromise between secularism and Arab society and culture. Semi-secularism is a solution to end this confrontation and separate religion from politics.

Experienced activists in Kefaya brought the benefit of institutional memory, strategic maturity, and organizational fluidity. While their expertise was welcome, it came at a price. They were entrenched in their old, risk-averse patterns of thought and strategy. The old guard discussed and analyzed things a lot but did not organize or demonstrate. We in the organization set up Youth for Change in 2005 to make decisions independently from Kefaya and provide a forum in which the youth could express their voice. We preferred actions to words. I followed the news about the opposition mobilizations and admired their vigor and energy. I felt a call to action, like I belonged out there with the demonstrators.

At the time, many of us were unaware of the long-standing conflict between leaders of Kefaya and leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood. The leaders of Kefaya consisted of members that came from communist and Nasserist groups established in the 1970s. President Sadat had weaponized the Muslim Brotherhood as a force against the communists and Nasserists who opposed him. This left a legacy of hate and distrust between these secular and religious groups, and it was reignited decades later when Kefaya became a more visible political actor. These historical animosities forced us, as youth activists, to act independently of them both.

I had participated in protests against the war in Iraq during 2003, and people that had demonstrated with me in Tahrir Square and Cairo University were part of the Kefaya movement. I inquired about how I could join Kefaya and was told that there was this movement growing out of Kefaya called Youth for Change. If I were to join their meetings, I would

be considered a member. I attended a few of the first meetings to establish the Youth for Change movement. Youth for Change was open and easy to join in order to draw as many people and spread ideas as quickly as possible. However, this low barrier of entry later became a fatal weakness that increased the likelihood of the group fragmenting.

As Gamal Mubarak became the heir apparent, most Egyptians rejected the very idea of hereditary succession—essentially a monarchy. This new political reality would be a huge step back for Egypt, which had been a bona fide republic since 1952. In the summer of 2005, I took part in my first public protest outside the attorney general's office. Our banners read "No to inheritance of power," "Down with Hosni Mubarak," and "The Egyptian Movement for Change...Kefaya." It energized several of the core members of the group and elevated my own involvement in the movement. We would all have a role to play in preparing for a protest. I began mapping out and securing the route for flash mobs. At other times I put up flyers or stayed on the lookout for police while others put up posters.

The Popular Front for Change (PFFC) was also involved. They were formed by a small cadre of communist and leftist activists following the Second Palestinian Intifada and the 2003 war in Iraq. It was a small but potent group. They were not well known like Kefaya, but they would join our events. Likewise, some Kefaya members joined PFFC events in 2004 and 2005. Since I was a fairly new activist, I attended both major PFFC events those years.

A centrist, secular political party known as El-Ghad, meaning "tomorrow," began to press for increased political participation and the peaceful change of power among political leaders and parties. Since El-Ghad was an official political party, their candidates could run in elections, enter into negotiations with the ruling party, and engage other politicians in a formal setting. These were all tools inaccessible to Youth for Change. Their founder Ayman Nour supported the idea of freedom of participation in street demonstrations. Thus, we utilized El-Ghad as a liberal platform that focused on democracy and human rights by joining it. I started organizing events in conjunction with them. While Kefaya and Youth for Change focused on pushing for social and economic changes from outside, El-Ghad focused on political reforms from inside the system.

However, Egypt did not see free and fair elections as Mubarak was sworn in for his fifth term. The following year, Kefaya and Youth for Change began to call for concrete social and economic reforms rather than abstract political rights and democratic ideals.* The Youth for Change movement drew on labor strikes and protests that were not directly critical of Mubarak. The government allowed these protests and even permitted the workers to establish the first independent trade unions in 2008 and 2010. However, the police dispersed the public events we organized because they often directly targeted Mubarak and his regime.

Building New Alliances on Old Opposition Rivalries

When the Kefaya movement began calling for regime change, the Muslim Brotherhood refused to join the calls. The Brotherhood wanted professional syndicates to pressure the government through elections, and not a revolution that would overthrow the regime. We asked young activists and leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood why they refused to call for change of a regime. They told us that they preferred to reform the regime because attempting to change it was very dangerous. They said that their way was gradual but more practical. The Brotherhood even referenced hadiths that spoke against rebellion and removal of rulers or governments.†

The younger activists were either unaware or indifferent to the historical rivalry between the liberals and the Muslim Brotherhood. Youth activists like myself defended any kind of connection with the Muslim Brotherhood and started lobbying inside the Kefaya movement to create opportunities for cooperation. We even met with leaders of Kefaya to convince them to cooperate and hold joint events. The two sides were initially unable to find common ground. However, we ultimately persuaded the leaders of both groups to organize a joint protest and agreed on the theme "Reform and Change." On the day of the protest, Kefaya and Youth for Change assembled 700 people, while the Muslim

* Our demands called for free elections, freedom of speech, canceling the emergency law, and freeing political prisoners. More abstractly, our demands then are our demands even now: respecting human dignity, freedom, and human rights.

† *Hadiths* are a collection of traditions containing sayings of the Prophet Muhammad which, along with accounts of his daily practice (the *Sunna*), constitute the major source of guidance for Muslims apart from the Koran.

Brotherhood organized an estimated 4,000 people.

I was shocked. We were all shocked. Members of the Muslim Brotherhood arrived in small groups calling for reform. They called for free elections and chanted against security overreach and abuse by the state. However, when Kefaya members chanted against Mubarak, the Muslim Brotherhood members purposely drowned out our chants. I felt a big "I told you so" emanating from the elders in Kefaya. There was a fundamental ideological difference between the two groups. The Kefaya movement called for a secular, civil state. The Brotherhood called for a religious, Islamist state. Even though both groups expressed dissatisfaction with the status quo, we were at an impasse.

Eventually, Youth for Change had to accept the reality that Mubarak could not be removed without the help of the Brotherhood. As a civil society organization, they were unmatched in terms of structure and organization. They had broad national membership and could mobilize their supporters rapidly and in huge numbers as needed. Youth for Change hoped for synergies between their more conservative views and our more liberal ones. We found common ground with younger members within the Brotherhood.

The older Kefaya leaders warned us not to take a conciliatory stance. They saw the Brotherhood as cowards who hedged their position depending on shifting political realities rather than standing by their ideals. They believed that the Brotherhood would try anything to stay in power. They told us that they were betrayed by the Brotherhood in the 1970s and that history would repeat itself.*

Segments of Egyptian society feared the Muslim Brotherhood attaining power. Some of these fears were the consequence of the negative media portrayal of the Brotherhood as terrorists. Minority groups such as Coptic Christians, seculars, and other non-religious organizations had fears rooted in the past. Others simply feared the unknown. We argued that if the Brotherhood intended to reform the government, we should give them a chance and then judge them based on their actions. Since a significant

* President Sadat had weaponized the Muslim Brotherhood as a force against the communists and Nasserists, and the Muslim Brotherhood allied with Sadat until the Egyptian–Israeli Peace Treaty in 1979.

number of Egyptians supported the Muslim Brotherhood, excluding them from the political process would be contradictory to our goal of building a democracy. We believed in freedom, that it was a right and not afforded only to us. Thus, if the Muslim Brotherhood won elections democratically, they could also be defeated through democracy if they failed to serve the Egyptian population. This is how democracy works. Or at least, that was our hope....

CHAPTER TWO

First Contested Presidential Elections

In May 2005, the Egyptian Parliament amended the constitution after a referendum allowing for multi-party candidates to compete for the presidency for the first time. The judiciary had expressed dissent against the government. Judges sought more autonomy to supervise the first multi-party presidential elections that were held in September 2005. The judges were credible in the eyes of the public since they were seen as an independent authoritative body. This made it harder for the regime to either repress or ignore them. Other than bribery, it appeared difficult for anyone to exert undue influence over the judiciary. Even though the government gave judges gifts, property, and higher positions in order to control the judges, they had formed a syndicate to remain autonomous. Many of the judges at the time had liberal political backgrounds and were not easily bribed by the government. The judges also put pressure on the regime by conducting their own sit-ins to draw public attention to their demands for greater autonomy.

Up until this time, political parties that were allowed to operate had to be officially sanctioned by the regime. The Nassery, El Wafd, and El Tagamoa opposition parties, in reality, supported the regime and were given seats in the parliament under the condition that they would not step out of line. In order to claim legitimacy, politicians had to maintain

their influence through bribes, threats, and election rigging.* However, in 2005, a movement known as "real opposition" began to gain ground and legitimacy. It consisted of the El-Ghad Party, the El-Karama Movement founded by Hamdeen Sabahi,† the Workers Party (Al-Aamal Party), and an Islamic Socialist party. What set these parties apart from previous political formations was their use of radical, nonviolent methods such as sit-ins and marches to pressure the regime.

The opposition continued complaining that the electoral rules prevented open competition. Kefaya, together with Youth for Change and members of El-Ghad, organized a protest demanding constitutional change that would ensure and protect free elections, as well as establish and defend an independent judiciary. We also wanted the end of the emergency law and limits on presidential terms. During the protest, the authorities sent their own paid protesters to attack us, and there were a number of sexual assaults on female activists.[1] This is a common tactic used by the regime to discourage women from joining street protests. However, it backfired on the regime. Instead of discouraging women from coming out to protest, it furthered their resolve. Immediately after people heard about the complaints of groping, harassment, and assault, women came out dressed in black and wearing white ribbons to call for senior officials to resign. Human rights activists and organizations described it as the "battlefield of shame." Rather than being judged and shunned by society, the plight of the women evoked sympathy from observers and unified the protesters.

In June, Mubarak announced that he would run for another term. This brought us to the streets. During one of the protests, the police would not allow us to enter Tahrir Square, and thousands of soldiers started kicking, hitting, and arresting demonstrators. I remember running, then stopping to shout and chant for a brief moment, only to begin running again. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest as I witnessed the soldiers attacking other protesters. The crowds were in complete chaos, and it was hard to stop or control the direction of their movement as the soldiers

* They would give people rice, sugar, oil, money and other supplies to vote for their candidates.

† Established in 1998, meaning "dignity."

randomly beat anyone in their reach. We spent hours in this chaotic struggle. At the end of the day the police caught me, and I spent my first night in prison. I was released in the morning, suffering no abuse or torture. Despite physically aggressive actions by the military, the protesters did not strike back or hurt the soldiers in any way.

In early 2006, the same judges who had sought greater autonomy from the regime published reports exposing corruption and vote rigging in the 2005 parliamentary elections. The leading judges behind the reports were Hisham Bastawisi and Mahmud Mekki.[2] Bastawisi was also the vice president of the Egyptian Court of Cassation and would go on to run in the 2012 presidential elections. Mekki would become vice president of Egypt from August 2012 to December 2012 during the first half of Mohamed Morsi's presidency.

In February, following the publication of the reports, the regime began prosecuting the judges. This led to another round of protests in support of the judges. We in Youth for Change, Kefaya, and El-Ghad supported the judges and participated in a sit-in outside the Judges Syndicate building against the government's decision. In coordination with individual activists, we also organized a one-day sit-in on Tahrir Square to support the judges' demands. The people at these sit-ins came from diverse backgrounds: young and old, men and women, Nasserists, communists, and liberals. We spent another week in tents outside the syndicate chanting and singing in support of the judges.

On April 20, 2006, the police came into the square. They destroyed the tents and dispersed the sit-in. These repressive tactics were well-publicized and led to a public outrage that brought even more people to join the sit-in the next day. As I was sleeping in the street, early on the morning of April 24, the police came and arrested us.

First Time Living in Jail

I was filled with rage as I watched the police taking away my friends. I loudly chanted "Down with Mubarak!" when a policeman pointed me out to some lower ranking officers. They surrounded me and as they searched my bag, they found it filled with protest flyers. I was led to the police lorry truck. They made me take off my shirt, made it into a blindfold,

and tied my hands. I could hear someone getting slapped by the police, crying out in pain. After a few minutes the door shut and the truck began to move. I removed my blindfold—as did others in the truck—to see who my companions were. The person that I heard being beaten turned out to be a photojournalist. His face was covered in blood.

We spent several hours in the truck as it drove throughout Cairo. When the truck finally stopped, we put our blindfolds back on. Police took us out of the truck and as they removed the blindfolds, I saw some of my friends from Kefaya and Youth for Change trudging along with many other unfamiliar faces. About twenty of us were put in a cell in the Qasr El Nil police station and left there. We refrained from talking since we did not know if there were police informants among us.

I saw another member of Kefaya tortured; the sounds of batons hitting raw flesh filled the air. He was a butcher with a great sense of humor. He supported the movement against Mubarak and had traveled from a faraway governorate to participate in the sit-in. My two close friends Mohamed Sharkawy and Ahmed Daorubi were also in the cell. There was a young boy who was crying because it was his first time getting arrested. He claimed he was simply a bystander in the protest, and he blamed us for his arrest. We sympathized with him, but asked him why he blamed us and not the police.

We were hungry but there was no food. The hunger made me irritable. The police had taken my cellphone, cigarettes, and work material from my new job at a construction firm. I feared I was going to be fired. After seven hours, we were moved to another police station called El-Khalifa police station. This police station was a temporary holding place wherein prisoners were held before being transferred or released.

While I was in jail, the prosecutor announced the charges against us: insulting the president and unsanctioned public gathering. The law concerning unsanctioned public gatherings had been enacted by the British in 1914 before the First World War and is still being widely used by the Egyptian regime against nonviolent protesters. We all denied the charges.

After seven days in this jail, we were then moved to a third prison, Tora. They moved us again because the prison was overcrowded as they continued arresting more people day after day. As we entered its walls, we

chanted "Down with this regime!" to show our unyielding defiance and boost our courage. The prison administration did not subject us to torture for this. They did shave our heads and gave us prison uniforms.

We were stunned when the prison guards took us aside, a number of us at a time, and shoved us into cells with people arrested for violent crimes. We were scared when the doors closed. We did not move at all and the prisoners occupying the jail cell silently stared us down. The cell smelled of everything I can think of: sweat, smoke, food, and sewage. The cell was approximately 15 by 20 feet with more than 50 prisoners packed in. There was no window, no space to breathe. People filled every inch of the cell and some—saving little space that there was—had to sleep on the shelves that had been built for stacking belongings. We did not dare make eye contact with any of the other prisoners.

Soon, one of the prisoners asked us what we were in prison for. When we said that we were arrested for political charges, they all laughed. They told us not to be afraid of them and that they would not hurt us. Their faces were scarred and hardened, aged beyond their years. I certainly would have hurried away from them had I crossed them on the street. But now, we were all cellmates. We told them our story. We gave them details that were already public, explaining what the Kefaya movement was and why we were demonstrating. We spoke of the injustice we saw in the actions of the police and how we believed only a nonviolent stance would help us achieve our goals. They, in turn, shared their grievances, and we learned that most of them came from extremely impoverished backgrounds.

The rule of the prison was that the newest prisoner slept next to the toilet, but upon hearing our story, they gave us a very good spot in the cell to sleep. They also shared their food and anything else we needed. My new cellmates gave me cigarettes and food to cure my persistent headache. My two activist friends and I spent the first week together. There was little space to breathe, and even less to think. We spent all this time imagining what our captors would do to us.

This prison, Tora, is infamous for abuse. It was built by King Fuad in 1908 as a solution for prison overcrowding and was then expanded by President Sadat during the bread riots of 1977. It was expanded again in

1979 during the protests that took place after Egypt signed a peace treaty with Israel. Under Mubarak, prison expansion and human rights abuses went hand in hand. Tora continued to take in prisoners faster than they could build new cells.

Our detention was being renewed every fifteen days as we waited for the verdict on the official charges levied against us. One day we heard the prison ring with the sound of people chanting. Another group of arrested activists were arriving. In response to their chant we chanted back "*Yaskot Hosni Mubarak*" ("Down with Hosni Mubarak"). The administrators of the prison punished us by locking the doors of our cell and inciting violent prisoners to hurt us. By then, we had found enough sympathy among our cellmates that they left us untouched.

In prison, we had to face our fears; we became adults.

A week later, another group of political prisoners arrived. They were arrested for protesting the previous arrests of activists. Alaa Abdel Fattah, who was by this time a famous blogger, was part of the arrested group. When Alaa had heard that activists were charged for insulting the president, he made a website with the sole purpose of making light of insulting the president and turning state repression against its perpetrators. On opening the website, the visitor was prompted, "If you want to insult the president, please press here." It was filled with jokes and funny pictures. Alaa's wit was in showing people how ridiculous it was that people were being arrested on the charge of "insulting the president" and yet the same crime could be committed by clicking a button on a website. This was just one tool the movement used to make the government's repression backfire and help build our movement.

A month after our arrest, many members of the Muslim Brotherhood were also arrested, including Mohammed Morsi, the future president of Egypt. They were kept separate from us in order to prevent interactions that might have led to communication and cooperation between our groups. The Brotherhood protested in support of the judges because they too felt that the elections had been compromised to the detriment of the Brotherhood members who were running for office.

We sent messages to other political prisoners to plan hunger strikes if our demands to be moved to cells with other political activists were

not met. Since we were banned from leaving our cell, and our time outdoors was limited to two hours a day, other prisoners helped convey our messages to activists in other parts of the prison. We told the guards that we did not understand why we were housed with violent criminals when our protests were decidedly nonviolent. We soon announced to the guards we were beginning a hunger strike and demanded a meeting with the prosecutor. Egyptian law requires that a prison must record a hunger strike lasting more than three days. Within 12 hours, my head was pounding, my stomach was hurting, and I was feeling drained of all my energy.

The prison administration sent in a shaikh from the mosque who told us that hunger strikes were prohibited by Islam.* It was "*haram*." We told him that it was not our hunger strikes but what was being done to us that was forbidden by Islam. We were around 50 to 55 prisoners by this time. We found older protesters among us, such as Kamal Khalil, who was an engineer, and Dr. Gamal Abdel Fatah, who was a pharmacist. They were both previously arrested during Sadat's reign for being communists. Two days into the hunger strike, the administration accepted our demands and prepared two separate cells. We would go on a hunger strike again during our nearly 50-day stay in Tora Prison. That time our demands were for more outdoor time and for access to newspapers and reading materials. Our demands were met, and life in prison went on.

We would go on to protest once more, this time against the sexual assault of our companion Mohammed Sharkawi by the state security forces. We went on a hunger strike for eight days and were put in solitary confinement. We broke our protest only after a prosecutor formally filed a case against the horrific, traumatic, and inhumane torture Mohammed was subjected to.

In our separate cells, we organized a communal way of living whereby everyone cooked together and shared their food, blankets, and cigarettes. The communists in the group had some experience of life in prison and created a schedule. At 8 am, they would open the doors and we would begin preparing breakfast. As a child, I had cooked breakfast for my siblings since my parents were working, and I was proud of my cooking

* Priests and shaikhs work within the ministry of interior to provide services to prisoners (job, not a religious conviction).

skills. Every day I attempted to make prison food more edible. Two political prisoners, Mohamed Adel and Malek Mostafa, were responsible for the food supply. If we had extra food, we would hand it to other prisoners. We shared everything in prison equally and tried to ensure no one went without a meal. We were caring for each other despite the regime's desire to break and divide us. After breakfast, we would read newspapers for which we had to constantly negotiate with the prison administration. In a strange way, prison felt like a "camp for activists." We played football, read, and exercised. We conversed at length about political change and our ideologies.

My time in prison taught me a lot. Alaa Abdel Fattah often talked to us about the benefits of open-source software, and Mohamed Adel would agree with her on the need for and benefits of open-source programming. We educated ourselves, built networking skills, and most importantly developed resistance and resilience to carry out our nonviolent struggle.

The worst part of prison was watching my mother cry during her visits, but I loved seeing her more than she could imagine. After two months, the prison administration began releasing a few of us each week. I would spend 57 days in prison before I was finally released.

Rethinking Our Resistance

Egypt had held its first contested elections in the fall of 2005, and Mubarak had "won" with an 88.6% majority. After losing this rigged election, the opposition candidate Ayman Nour—the founder and chairman of the El-Ghad party—was thrown in jail under false charges of forgery. Mubarak would remain in power for another six years, and the pro-democracy movement was weak, divided, and confused. The elections had given many activists a fleeting sense of hope that change might be near, but this hope was quickly crushed by the immediate and total repression of any sign of opposition by the emboldened Mubarak regime. Many activists I knew were beginning to ask: *So what now? Did our protests mean anything, and will continued protests be helpful? What will we protest for? What change do we want? What tactics beyond protest should we use? Who would be our allies in calling for freedom? How could we impact real changes in the lives of ordinary Egyptians who live under extreme poverty, oppression, and daily hardships?*

These were the questions that went unheeded even if protests gradually became routine in 2006. We failed to understand that a protest is not an end in itself. Without clear goals and outcomes, demonstrations began to lose their appeal and momentum. We did not have a long-term strategy, nor did we have a plan to create enough leverage and pressure that would effectively challenge Mubarak's grip on power. Our activism was reduced to small meetings in cafes. Even the Kefaya headquarters appeared to become a social club wherein our discussions involved sports, religion, and culture. The government was relatively unconcerned about our protests as they were tiny and ineffective. Still, even if reduced to socializing, the meetings and discussions allowed us to remain in touch, to maintain networks of trust, to keep our hopes alive. Meanwhile, the regime's perception of its own strength might have in fact made it more ignorant of its precarious position, oblivious to its inherent weaknesses, and heedless about the likelihood and whereabouts of a potential outburst of popular discontent.

At the same time, the mistrust inside the "real opposition" parties such as El-Ghad, El-Wafd (an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood), El-Karama (Nasserists), and Al-Aamal (Islamic Socialists) was eroding hope for a successful change. These parties were in favor of overturning Mubarak's regime entirely and did not believe in cutting deals with the government in exchange for incremental, limited change. However, no single party had enough power by itself to mobilize people and initiate the change it desired. What is worse, there was little agreement among them concerning the means—whether violent or nonviolent—to challenge the regime, or the end goals of such a challenge—be it democracy or a strongman's rule. All these conflicting views were colored by a long history of mistrust between the opposition party members. El-Wafd had a huge base of support before the 1952 coup and was composed of liberals seeking democratic values. The Nasserists, on the other hand, supported the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser and praised the fall of the democratic era that preceded him. These fundamental ideological differences persisted over the decades. Thus, the Nasserists refused to cooperate with El-Wafd, while El-Wafd refused to join hands with the Radical Opposition Front. The El-Ghad party was plagued by infighting and lacked a charismatic

leader after Ayman Nour was arrested. The opposition and the Kefaya movement had no united front to represent their interests.

Because of this internal strife, I decided to leave El-Ghad and joined the Democratic Front Party (DFP) which was more directed toward legal reform and less radical. The DFP was founded by Professor al-Ghazalli who used to be part of the ruling NDP party. He had not liked their policies and formed a liberal opposition party that focused on changing the laws within Egypt. They supported young activists and did not believe in the use of violence to achieve desired political change.

I maintained my personal connections with members of the El-Ghad party and Youth for Change through weekly meetings. We met in cafes and gardens in downtown Cairo near Tahrir Square where almost every night politicians, intellectuals, actors, and other people interested in culture and politics filled the area. We also held meetings at the headquarters of El-Ghad, Kefaya, and the Revolutionary Socialists in Giza.

Youth for Change's leadership was stuck in an old, pre-internet mindset. They were skeptical of utilizing new resources such as the internet and social media and preferred to hold debates, write articles, and organize conferences—all of which they were good at doing, even though the results were not obvious as people did not care about complex ideas and debates of capitalism versus communism.* The methods used by the old leadership of the Youth for Change were slow to make an impact, while the increasingly young membership of Youth for Change wanted to employ new tools such as comics, memes, and videos that could appeal to and attract people quickly and effectively.

By the end of 2007, I was meeting with trusted friends and activists to discuss renewing Youth for Change. We needed to revise our strategy and our message—to take a step-by-step approach and attract new members to our groups. We thought that before we confront the regime with demonstrations our strategy must be to bring new blood and strengthen our activism. One way to do so would be through building a strong coalition with workers and unions that would pave the way to a national

* Much like the brick-and-mortar store owner who is skeptical of moving his business to an online shop, the older activists did not visualize the potential benefits of activism over the internet.

movement. The crux of such a movement would be a new generation of activists committed to a struggle for the long haul. We needed to focus our message on linking social and political demands and prepare for a long-term resistance driven by new ideas.

We saw an opportunity as worker protests and sit-ins proliferated throughout Egypt. Mubarak had allowed more space for such protests because the workers did not call for regime change and instead pressed economic demands, including better wages and working conditions. We wanted to be part of these workers' protests and to convince them of the link between their social and economic demands and democracy. There could be no hope of improving social conditions without transforming the corrupt and inefficient political system.

Influenced deeply by the Solidarity movement in Poland, we founded Tadamun—an organization aimed at supporting the workers' protests. *Tadamun* means "solidarity" in Arabic. We learned of Solidarity through a BBC documentary that was featured on the Academy of Change website. Solidarity was driven by the philosophy of nonviolent organizing and civil resistance actions. The movement was spearheaded by a broad social coalition that united various opposition forces, including workers, intellectuals, professional groups, farmers, and students. Their strategically developed civil resistance propelled by the millions that joined Solidarity, helped shed people's fears, and forced the repressive regime to relinquish its power in 1989, paving the way for successful democratic transition in the 1990s.

What resonated with us the most was that the Solidarity movement was not dominated by the opposition elite. It focused on the demands of common people and made a connection between these demands and democracy. They built a deep social movement before they went out to protest. At first glance, people may not see a direct connection between the price of food and democracy. However, Lech Walesa, the leader of the movement, was a shipyard electrician who made it clear that achieving people's demands could not be isolated from the realization of democracy.

We needed to do the same. We turned our attention to expressions of solidarity with the workers backed up by concrete actions in support of their protests. Tadamun began to provide tents, food, and blankets to

the workers' protest sites. It also helped protesters garner greater media attention about their demonstrations and demands, and it provided legal support.

Through our aid work we started creating a genuine solidarity network with people from other social classes and across many cities and regions.

From Solidarity with Workers to a National Strike

Our inspiration for the April 6 Movement began when the Mahalla workers went on strike. Mahalla is a city about 100 miles north of Cairo known for its textile industry. People in that city come from generations of working-class families and are accustomed to going on strikes and engaging in sit-ins. During the past decade, the government's attention was focused primarily on privatization of key industries, such as manufacturing, without offering much social protections for the workers. The workers were not paid well, not given food during the day, and not compensated for work-related injuries. In February and March 2007, the prices of major commodities such as sugar, oil, and lentils doubled. At the end of 2007, the workers decided to organize a citywide sit-in, and members from Tadamun began to travel to Mahalla to support the event. Activists throughout Egypt began to coordinate with the strike leaders in Mahalla to organize future protests, especially during the early months of 2008.

Our goal was to link the economic demands of workers—primarily addressing low wages, food shortages, and poverty—with broader political demands. These political demands centered around basic social, economic, and political freedoms such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and respecting human rights. We wanted fairness and transparency within the democratic process and the establishment of a rule of law resembling that of the Western democracies. We stressed to the workers that Mubarak's regime was to blame for the widening gap between the rich and poor in Egypt and that his economic policies enriched only his cronies at the expense of common Egyptians.

We did not believe in the idea of "benevolent dictators." Nasser and Sadat had convinced many Egyptians that we did not need democracy or the Western lifestyle but a wise dictator who would put the needs of all Egyptians first. Through all our activities and outreach, we wanted to

convince the workers that hardworking Egyptians should not live at the mercy of strongmen and autocrats and that the only way to take our future into our own hands was through initiating a needed political change.

We met people face-to-face to recruit them to our protests. We accepted the help of lawyers to work pro bono to defend workers in the courts and provide information pertaining to workers' rights and labor laws. Many of the lawyers we knew were part of Youth for Change and had been involved in communist or socialist activities in the past. Journalists within Youth for Change were also publishing articles and news in privately circulated newspapers to communicate with people. The connection between a brutal and oppressive system and the suffering of common people was clear to us. Those in power got richer while everyone else got poorer. Industry leaders need to be accountable to their workers, but within this corrupt system they would bribe their way out of any consequences from their abuses. We needed to convince the workers that unless there was a systemic change that removed the cancer of corruption from the Egyptian body politic, their suffering would never cease.

Members of the El-Ghad party, Al-Aamal party, Kefaya, Youth for Change, and other activist groups began to promote and share information about the strike, raising awareness about the forthcoming dissent. We promoted our general strike during the March 21, 2008, conference of the Journalist's Syndicate in Cairo against imperialism and globalization organized by the members of the socialist group the Revolutionary Socialists and the Al-Aamal party. People from leftist groups all over the world attended, including activists for Palestinian rights and those against globalization. We bought TV ads that ran at the bottom of the screen like community announcements. While national Egyptian news channels were censored, the correspondents of outlets such as *Al Jazeera* and *BBC Arabic* were covering events in Egypt. People even began writing the time and place of the protests on currency notes to spread the message about the strike.

The idea of a general strike began to spread among activists. This was, however, a controversial idea, to say the least. Many activists who had revolutionary socialist and communist backgrounds were against using a general strike. They warned us that articulating political demands as part

of our labor organizing would provoke backlash from the regime and be considered a death knell to the workers' movement. If their strikes ever questioned or threatened Mubarak's grip on power, they argued, the state security apparatus would dismantle unions and labor organizations. As young activists, we saw this as a chance more than a threat, an opportunity to link ordinary people with politics and make the government hear our voices and our demands.

I personally envisioned a protest movement that extended beyond Cairo and Mahalla. Limiting our organizing and mobilizing activities to Cairo in the past had been a mistake as it made it easier for the regime to repress the movement. In the early months of 2008, I conceived of a nationwide general strike to occur on April 6. I was texting everyone I knew about this idea. One person I texted was Esraa Abdel Fatteh, whom I had known since 2005 when she was an active member of the El-Ghad party. Upon seeing my message, she immediately called me. "How can I help?" she asked. We agreed that since text messages would not be quick and effective enough to disseminate our call to strike, social media could be a useful tool to deploy. It would allow us to easily connect people and encourage them to go on strike. Esraa also suggested we try a new platform called Facebook.

Facebook in 2008 was not a web platform used for politics in Egypt. Young Egyptians were using Facebook to discuss movies, songs, and hobbies. We figured it was worth trying to promote a general strike through Facebook. There were no public Facebook pages at the time, only Facebook groups—private communities wherein the admins would have to approve members. I was on my way to work on the morning of March 23, 2008, when Esraa and I talked, and we decided to create a Facebook public group called "Next April 6 Day Will Be a General Strike in Egypt."

Our message was simple: no torture, no corruption, no impunity. We asked people to join a general national strike with the call for better education, better wages, better housing, and government transparency. We wrote on the Facebook group page that if Egyptians would only unite, we could bring about change. During the very first day, thousands of Egyptians joined the group. News of our Facebook group spread like wildfire. By the second day, we had 55,000 members, who shared the call

for a general strike with their friends, family, and even work colleagues. Facebook members changed their individual profile pictures to the April 6 logo and began posting the link to the group on their status updates.

The crux of our messaging on Facebook was that power lies with the people. The protest would not be in support of a specific political party; rather it would emphasize the general message against corruption. Members were encouraged to share their ideas on how to participate in a national strike. People posted flyers, graffiti, and sarcastic cartoons. Ideas that were shared by Facebook users about wearing black to the protest, carrying the Egyptian flag, and abstaining from work became the unifying elements of our protest. The movement branding happened as a result of a decentralized, grassroots-led, and consensus-seeking process undertaken by thousands of Facebook group members. My sister, Esraa, and I monitored the Facebook group around the clock to make sure we removed malicious posts. Omar Hadi, a friend and active member of Youth for Change, also helped organize and manage the Facebook group by moderating discussions and promoting engagement. We deliberately avoided politically polarizing messages, treading carefully so as not to stoke resentment or divisions among members or public fear of government retribution.

The two weeks preceding April 6 were abuzz with activity. Our primary goal was to involve as many people as possible. We knew that if more people stood behind our message of ending systemic abuse, the more inclined each person would be to participate in the strike. There was not a lot of technical planning going on behind the scenes. The success of our efforts was in large part due to a snowball effect of various popular ideas, calls, and individual activism.

People were climbing to the top of high buildings and throwing massive amounts of flyers into the air which would spread across the streets. There were spontaneous actions being taken by people without any direction. People were inspired by what they saw others doing so they too began to paint graffiti and organize spontaneous demonstrations. This participation did not come from formal recruitment or orientation but was purely based on inspiration—the momentum of people being inspired when they saw other people act.

Our strike did not have a single leader who would make decisions or direct actions. We did not have a background in political organizing or strategic planning. Instead, we encouraged people to do whatever they could—to use their own individual skills and strengths to promote and engage in the strike. It was not long before more people began spraying graffiti, printing and distributing flyers and posters, and writing songs promoting the strike and our message.

At the beginning of April, warnings began to flash on state-controlled Egyptian media. The interior minister announced through radio, television, and newspapers that anyone associated with the strike would neither be forgotten nor forgiven. Every hour, they threatened all kinds of punishments for participation. Ironically, such warnings helped spread the message about the strike. Soon, the strike became known and talked about throughout Egypt. The human rights centers in the country and the lawyers committee—established a few days before the strike—geared themselves toward the defense of those arrested on the day of the strike. The Hisham Mubarak Center for Human Rights, the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights, Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, El Nadeem Center for Rehabilitation, Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, and The United Lawyers were on standby for whatever would happen. Independent newspapers such as *Aldostor* (Constitution), *AlMasri Alyoum* (The Egyptian Today), and *AlBadeel* (The Alternative) supported the strike and printed large front-page headlines, such as "The strike is tomorrow" on April 5.

In early 2008, tracking people on the internet was difficult, and the Egyptian security apparatus did not yet have the electronic means to monitor or identify activists online. As smartphones were not in mass use in Egypt, internet cafes and chat rooms were our safe harbors. Social media allowed us to safely scale up and bring about a new wave of collective action. It changed the dynamics of political dissent. Since Facebook was also relatively new for Egyptians, the Egyptian police did not have technology to track communications taking place in that medium. This would not be the case a few years later. Egypt has since acquired technology to track mobile phone GPS and surveil activists under the guise of

tracking terrorists. Since 2013, this advanced technology has imprisoned many activists under the name of fighting terrorism.

We did, however, face many technical difficulties with Facebook. Government supporters reported my user account as spam and succeeded in having Facebook administrators shut it down. We contacted Facebook to resolve this but received no response. Technical glitches began to show up as we were unable to add my new account as an admin to the April 6 Facebook group. Thus, Esraa and I shared her account to manage the group.

On April 5, Egyptian security forces arrested several well-known activists. Two things became evident: First, it demonstrated the success of our call to strike. When the regime ramped up its repressive policies, it exposed its fear of our actions. Second, it showed that the seemingly almighty state security apparatus did not have a clue who was behind the call to strike when it conducted random arrests of activists, bloggers, and worker leaders who were not directly involved. When questioned by state security, the arrestees did not reveal the true identities of the organizers. Most activists in Egypt, regardless of their political affiliation or leaning, had developed a strong sense of solidarity with other activists. They believed that freedom of speech was a constitutional right and that the regime and its security forces were at fault for violating that right when they arrested them. Activists considered the fight against corruption as a badge of honor and the ability to speak their mind an inherent right. They also knew that the police would eventually release them anyway. Revealing any activists' names could hurt their long-term cause.

The days before the strike were filled with excitement about the growing mobilization but also personal fear. My daughter was born a month before the April 6 strike, and my wife was living with her parents. I had previously promised her that I would stop all political activities, but as the strike day came closer, I revealed to her that I was intimately involved in the forthcoming political strife. She burst into tears, afraid and skeptical. She did eventually accept my decision. After we married, my wife had chosen to become a housewife to take care of our family. While I hid away from police raids, she was taking care of our daughter and our home. This time, I asked her to stay with her parents. I believed it was too dangerous

to have her stay with me and put both her and our newborn daughter in unnecessary danger. I feared getting arrested in their presence and I could not bear the thought that any harm would come to them. I asked my wife to lie to both our parents about my whereabouts and decided to shut down any communication with her for some time.

The days before the strike, I was sleeping in my car most nights. I avoided known gathering places downtown and took a sabbatical from work. I had a private contracting business with a partner in a small town just outside of Cairo, which allowed me to take a break with relative ease. I changed the location of my car every day, often sleeping in the desert.

April 6: The Day of The Strike

The day of the strike was as huge a surprise for me as it was for the authorities. It was Sunday, which in the Middle East is the first day of work (Friday and Saturday comprise the weekend). On a usual Sunday morning, Cairo is a bustling, overcrowded city with every nook and cranny crammed with people trying to contend with their daily economic struggles for survival. However, on the Sunday morning of April 6, Cairo was eerily silent and empty. I realized that morning that we had achieved something that had never been done in the recent history of our country—a nationwide stay-in.

The streets were empty, shops were closed, and public transportation stopped. No students filled the universities. Classes were empty. Many governorates (or regions) across Egypt were quiet, empty of their usual traffic and pedestrians. People stayed home on the first workday of the week in a sign of protest against the government. This was a powerful signal that our call to a national strike was succeeding.

Our demonstrations in Cairo began at noon. The initial plan was to march from various parts of the city into Tahrir Square. However, the march originating in East Cairo was broken up by the security forces. The police arrested anyone trying to get to the square. Riot police were stationed at Tahrir Square and outside the lawyers', doctors', and journalists' syndicates. Some of the syndicates had supported activists and voiced their concerns about the situation in Egypt. However, most syndicates were state-controlled and released statements in favor of the Mubarak

regime. The government was also aware that if the protesters occupied Tahrir Square this could be a game changer and possibly lead to a revolution. In the past, Tahrir Square had been central to protests against Sadat and Mubarak and had the potential to grab the attention of the nation.

Due to the heavy restrictions and security presence in the capital, the internet groups agreed to organize and hold decentralized demonstrations in Cairo, Alexandria, Port Said, and Mansoura. Previously, demonstrations would concentrate in one place. Since the police were strictly controlling most of the important sites where we could gather to protest, we decided it would be better to hold spontaneous demonstrations and flash mobs in various parts of the city. In that way, the security forces were not able to track our movement, and we could escape arrest. We had coordinated people's movements and actions through phone calls, emails, and Facebook with all I had learned over the years from conferences, meetings, and protests. We were constantly on the phone trying to gauge the situation in the main governorates. Hundreds of students had gathered to protest at three universities in Cairo. Many parts of upper Egypt did not have access to the internet, and our movement had not yet reached out to many people there.* Thus, the April 6 strike was limited to the governorates of Cairo, Alexandria, Port Said, Mansoura, and Mahalla.

During the afternoon of April 6, we began hearing news from Mahalla. The state security had arrested Kamal al-Fayoumi, one of the Mahalla strike leaders, and forced many workers to show up to work under dire threats of arrest and torture. Despite serious oppression, the people of Mahalla remained undeterred and went out to protest. They gathered in the central square, el-Shun, and tore down Mubarak's posters and statues. In their chants and slogans they held Mubarak squarely responsible for their suffering. The Democratic Front Party opened its headquarters in Shun Square to provide media coverage and legal support. The security forces use their usual tools of repression: beatings, arbitrary arrests, and killings. People witnessed that those who were meant to protect them were in fact the ones hurting them. This angered them and further fueled

* Later, when I traveled to upper Egypt as an engineer to work on the water supply and concrete water tanks, I met many students and supporters from our movement. But, in 2008, there was no protest activity in that region.

their protest, and some activists threw stones at the police. This led to a cycle of violence. The clashes between the security forces and protesters continued for three days during which time hundreds were arrested and dozens were killed. One of those killed was Ahmed Ali Mabrouk, a 15-year-old bystander. He lived with his family in an apartment near Jumhuriya Square and had rushed to the balcony to see the commotion outside when he was hit by a bullet in his head and neck. By the time he made it to the hospital, he was already dead. Mahalla soon festered with military checkpoints and soldiers on the streets. The regime closed down the town to prevent the protest fever from spreading to other cities and its residents. The streets of Mahalla resembled a war zone.

Had it not been for the immediate and brutal repression by the state, the protest fervor of Mahalla would have ignited the whole of Egypt. It was the first time Egypt saw such large protests against the government since 1977 when Sadat increased food prices. However, we did not have very effective communications and planning strategies in place. Only foreign media channels, such as the *BBC* and *Al Jazeera*, were covering what was happening in Mahalla. The state media remained quiet about these protests. Hundreds of activists throughout Egypt were arrested: Ahmed Nassar in Alexandria, Ahmed Milad in Damanhur, Mohammed Mustafa in Port Said, Magdi Qarqar and Ahmad Badawi in Cairo, and the list goes on. The arrest of these key activist leaders not only left a vacuum in effective organizing but also served as a deterrent to other people against joining the movement.

Esraa and another activist, Nadia Mabrouk, were the key female figures of our movement. That same day, they were arrested around noon while sitting in a cafe in downtown Cairo. This was especially heartbreaking because a few weeks earlier, Esraa had shared with me her fears of being arrested. I can still clearly remember my assurances in response: "State security does not arrest women because this would look bad for them. Don't worry, if they arrest anyone, it would be me, not you." Alas, I was wrong. The security services found out that she was the administrator of the April 6 Facebook group, and now she was in a jail cell. Esraa's arrest also meant that our original Facebook account might have been compromised, but to this day we do not know who ratted her out. This led me to

create another personal account for myself to inform people about the ongoing events in Mahalla.

I tried organizing a protest in downtown Cairo, but we had to run away when the police attempted to arrest us. I then joined the strike taking place in front of the lawyers' syndicate. Hundreds of people stood on top of the balcony and roof of the syndicate building, chanting "Down with Mubarak." After leaving the protest, I tried to coordinate efforts to free those that were arrested. I spoke with lawyers at the Hisham Mubarak Center for Human Rights* and Khaled Ali's office. Both places were at the legal forefront of defending activists arrested in Egypt. We spoke about potential solutions and what could be done for those who were arrested. What could we do for Esraa and our colleagues? Should the lawyers call for their release or should we wait? We decided to wait, as they were in the police station and we couldn't do anything for them with the police. If they were transferred to the prosecutor's office, then the lawyers could file for their release. If they were taken to jail, we could provide food and clothing that they would need. This discussion was very sad for all of us as there was little to nothing that we could do.

Until the day of the strike, I had maintained my anonymity by using the moniker "Ghosty" when communicating or posting on social media. I revealed my identity on the April 6 Facebook group after Esraa was arrested and her identity had been revealed. When the police arrested her, they questioned her and those who were arrested with her about her activity online. When some of the women who were arrested along with her were released, they told us that the police knew about Esraa's activities. Soon these details were being written on the group page and were later reported on the news. I felt strongly that I needed to stand with her as one of the co-founders of the Facebook group.

I also wanted to make sure that people knew that there was still someone who was in charge of managing the Facebook group. The state security was now looking for me. The security agents were posted near my parents' home, my home, and my work, with the clear intention of arresting me on the spot. While walking up to a cafe where I planned to meet with fellow

* Founded by Ahmed Seif, a famous lawyer and Alaa Abdel Fattah's father.

activists, I was spotted by the agents. When I realized it, I began to run. As I was being chased, a seventeen-year-old girl helped me. She screamed to create a diversion, grabbing the attention of the nearby pedestrians and officers. This distraction was enough for me to safely escape.

That day, I received multiple calls from prominent government mediators and public figures who offered me a quick quid pro quo: shut down the April 6 Facebook group and the government would no longer pursue me. I rejected the offer and switched off my phone to avoid being tracked. The April 6 Movement had begun, and, even if it meant the ongoing danger of being detained, I would not allow the regime to disband the Facebook group which had initiated the dream. I believed that this dream of a youth movement would carry the torch that would eventually spark a revolution.

In order to extend public solidarity with the political detainees and maintain the momentum of the April 6 Movement, we decided to organize a strike to call for the release of our arrested colleagues on May 4. This also happened to be Mubarak's birthday. Banners were flying throughout Egypt praising Mubarak. The 4th of May was a reaction to April 6 and the events that transpired. Through private discussions over the Facebook group, we decided to create a "day of rage" against Mubarak. We used the same tools we had used to organize April 6—SMS, Facebook, flyers, media—but could not garner the same enthusiasm. However, it did send a clear message to the regime that we had not given up. We wanted to signal to the regime that our struggle would not end until all our activist friends were released. On hearing about the strike, the government immediately mobilized its resources, sending out TV anchors and famous personalities to criticize strikes as chaos. They portrayed protesters as traitors trying to destroy Egypt.

May 4 would not have the same momentum as April 6. The main success of the strike on April 6, 2008, was not only that it mobilized tens of thousands of people across Egypt but that it also forced the government to offer economic concessions. The day after the strike began, the regime announced a 30% increase in wages and a reduction in prices of staple goods such as oil, rice, and flour.

At the same time, we, as activists, were poorly prepared to handle the

overwhelming repression used by the state security forces. It became obvious that we had not developed the strategic capacity to keep protests alive or to shift to less risky tactics such as nationwide boycotts or civil disobedience that would keep Egyptians away from work and also out of the streets. Furthermore, we had failed to set up alternative channels of communication and dissemination of information in case of a likely media blackout by the regime. We did not have proper means with which to defend ourselves and do so nonviolently, and nor were we prepared to withstand the violent and unrelenting response from the security forces.

We learned a key lesson about our resistance: we needed movement infrastructure. We had to organize a stronger movement with the capacity to deploy different means of civil resistance in case protests were successfully countered by the regime. I spent the weeks after the strike following up with and trying to help those who had been arrested, which led me to realize we also needed a more concrete strategy to help those detained and jailed by the security forces.

Living with Torture

They say that dreams come true, but nightmares are dreams too. I had oftentimes dreamt of my own torture. The reality, however, far surpassed those nightmares. It was the morning of May 7, 2008, and I had woken up feeling more pessimistic than usual. I was leaving my office before lunch to make my appointments with construction contractors that day. I switched on my phone to call Ahmad Badawi, a friend who had been released after a month in prison. From April 6 to May 7 I had kept my phone turned off, only using it quickly to make emergency calls. I had heard rumors that the government gained access to surveillance technology that could track people. But I did not heed these warnings. I called Ahmed to congratulate him on his release and to make a plan to celebrate together. I thought I was safe from the police. 20 minutes later, I was surrounded by officers and arrested. I felt as if I was Will Smith in the movie *Enemy of the State*.

I was driving to my first meeting site and since I had switched on my phone, I changed my usual route to be extra cautious. I looked at my weary, run-down car (who I fondly called Zakzoka) and gave her a few words of consolation. *It's okay, Zakzoka. Next month I will buy you some*



Ahmed's car Zakzoka.

new batteries. While I was pondering how much money it would cost to fix Zakzoka's broken driving shaft, badly welded suspension arm, and the sound emanating from the steering wheel, I was suddenly blocked by a minibus. I thought to myself, *What an idiot! Doesn't even know how to drive in an empty desert.* When I noticed several pairs of angry eyes focused on me, I knew they had arrived. Eight hefty plainclothes men hurried out of the bus. I could see three cars blocking the road behind me. I tried to drive away, but my car was hit with a hail of stones.

Once the men reached my car, I heard one of them saying, "Break his bones. I don't want him to stop screaming." The other men seemed only too eager to execute his order. When they pulled me out of the car, one of the men covered my face with my t-shirt, another ripped my undershirt into two pieces, a third one covered my eyes with the pieces ripped from my undershirt, while a fourth one tied my hands behind my back. I thought to myself, *Great teamwork, guys!* Then the first of many beatings began.

Amid the storm of punches and kicks, I found myself lying flat on the ground. Soon the rope tying my hands had been replaced with handcuffs.

I asked politely if they could be made slightly looser. They told me to shut up. Then came the verbal abuses. After having exhausted their repertoire of curses against my family, they exclaimed, "You think you're a hero? That you can achieve what others have failed to? Prepare the electrifier. This boy needs to be taught how to behave. We are this country; we are your master. Why don't you answer me now?" I simply responded, "I'm confused. Do you want me to speak or do you want me to shut up?" The beating continued.

After some time—I'm not really sure how long—I was left by myself. As I heard distant voices, I figured I must be at the police station. I no longer had my eyes covered and saw a low-ranking officer close by. I pleaded with him to loosen my handcuffs. They were really quite painful. He said he would go down and get the keys. After a few minutes, he loosened my handcuffs. I then asked him for water, but he said no. Fair enough. Then I asked for cigarettes. He looked at me in disbelief. I told him that I had a whole pack in my car and that he could give me one and keep the rest. He left soon after. Fortunately, another man came and lit a cigarette for me. Oh, what a joy. *He's really a nice guy*, I thought. They took me back to the minibus and, after some driving, we reached a familiar place.

I had smelled this torture and death before. It was Tora Prison. Finally, my blindfold was removed, and I was climbing the same iron stairs that I had walked up two years earlier. My captors took me to the end of the corridor, where two police officers were chatting about girls, hash, and life. I contributed my thoughts to the discussion since we are all better informed about such topics if we learn from each other. Their conversation abruptly halted as the sound of heavy footsteps echoed through the hall. A man yelled at me, "So you are the guy who encourages people to rebel!" He showered me with a storm of slaps and punches. That was all. He left with the same fast strides with which he walked in. Weird. The men who chatted with me earlier confessed, "Sorry Ahmed, we cannot do anything to help you." Every bit of kindness was truly appreciated in those moments. But soon, I heard many people approaching and thought to myself, *God, save me*.

I was dragged into an air-conditioned room. My nose smelled a luxurious carpet. This was certainly an office of someone higher in the police

hierarchy. Then the psychological games began. One of the men in the room suggested that they simply issue a detention warrant and get rid of me. He threatened me with a prison sentence, rape, and torture. In response to this, the commanding officer said: "No. He will tell us everything anyway." So, the conversation began.

"Now, tell me, Facebook guy, how come you received a call for questioning and did not come?"

"I did not receive anything," I said.

"Answer politely, you son of a *****." Slaps. Punches. Kicks. *Ouch*.

"I will ask one more time: How come you received our call for questioning and did not show up?"

"I thought it was just for a quick chat, and thought it would not be useful," I said.

"We are the ones who decide if it is useful or not."

Another officer said, "Sir, he is not well behaved. Let me teach him a lesson. The electrifier is ready in the other room." More punches, slaps, and kicks. I was a ball on a football field with two kickers.

"What is the Facebook group password?" asked the high-ranking officer.

"I don't remember. It was written on a small paper and I have forgotten it," I lied. A huge slap. *Ouch*.

The officer yelled angrily, "How could you bring him to me without getting him prepared to answer my questions? Do not waste my valuable time." I was dragged out of the room. After a more hefty beating, I was taken back into the office. The leading officer asked, "Now, do you remember the password, or should we bring the rod? Bring me the thickest rod you have." Sticking a rod up a prisoner's butt was an infamous torture method. So, I yielded. "I remember now. It was also sent to me via SMS. Let me check as it might have been deleted." They found the password to the Facebook group on my phone. But they failed to ask me the email ID that was needed to gain access to the account. I thought that those in security who know how to use Facebook had yet to be born.

They continued to play their game.

"Who is Moshira?"

"I don't know." Slaps. Punches. Kicks.

"What is her full name? What is her home address? Who is Fatema?

Einas? Omar?" The beating continued. "Who is Gamila Ismail? Why is she texting you? Who are Nagla Bedir, Ahmed Mohsin?"

Annoyed by my meaningless answers, the officer had had enough of me. As I was blindfolded, a slap on my right ear caused me to see white light in pitch dark. I was handcuffed to an iron door and left for the night. Another officer passed by and removed the handcuff attachment to the iron door so I could sleep on the floor. He then asked me if I was the same guy who ten days ago had been asked to show up for questioning. When I answered yes, he said that the officer who called me for questioning was on leave today and would not have agreed with what was done to me. The possibilities of what might be my fate ran endlessly in my mind. Maybe I would spend a few months in prison or maybe I would be tortured to death. However, in that moment, I had a feeling that I would be released because they had decreased the amount of torture I had been receiving. At one point someone put cream on my skin to help the wounds that they had just created on my back, neck, and head. This gave me hope that I would be released as they might be trying to hide the signs of torture.

The next day, I was taken to meet this supposedly kinder officer, and the good cop routine started. He lectured me about how I should see the police as my parents and think about legal ways to oppose the government. Not Facebook. He talked and negotiated with me to establish a political party and be a politician inside the regime. These conversations signaled they were trying to make a deal and I would be released. He told me to take his words seriously. And then I was let out of the prison. OK, maybe he was indeed that kinder type and that's why I walked out. Or maybe it was the people with whom I had been secretly checking in daily to let them know I wasn't arrested; they were making noise on Facebook that I was missing and maybe had been arrested. Maybe after the arrest of Esraa and others, Mubarak wanted to appear more democratic to the US. I'll never know the reasons for my arrest or, ultimately, my release. Before 2006 I wasn't known to the Security Services, but after my time in prison, they knew who I was and what my activities were.

With my belongings in hand, I called my wife, crying.

"Hello, dear."

"Honey, are you okay!?"

"Yes, I'm okay. Don't worry."

"Did they harm you? I was so afraid." Sniffling inaudible tones.

"Stop crying, I cannot understand anything."

You are out of credit. Please recharge your phone so you can resume your calling services.

Determined to Carry On

After I had disappeared, many of my colleagues began a frantic search for me. They eventually found me at my home on May 8, bruised and beaten, having just been released by the state security. They rushed me to the hospital. The next day was my mother's birthday, and I joined my family to celebrate it with sores all over my body. I refused to tell my wife and my mother what had happened to me. I wore a shirt that covered my arms and neck. I only told them that I was tired. My wife knew I was not okay, but I refused to share with her any details.

I began to write about what had just happened on my personal blog, "The Unlucky Ghost."*

There was no permanent injury to my body. There was, however, permanent damage to my soul. The torture remains seared in my memory forever as the sounds of screams and cries and the sense of helplessness echo around me. They made me feel as if I was no one—that I could be killed at any time and no one would do anything about it. To this day, whenever I hear news of someone being arrested, it fills me with dread.

Even in such despair, I was not deterred. We had achieved something incredibly important on April 6. We woke up Egyptians. Their call for dignity and justice broke the silence. On that day, we harnessed the real power—the power of hundreds of thousands of people, including the youth. This faith that the impossible can become possible has kept me motivated ever since. It propelled my work as an activist. I knew the time was ripe to create even stronger waves of change.

* The blog was the place where I would write about political issues, things in my neighborhood like traffic, and even movies. When I was in prison in 2006, I would write articles that my brother Mostafa would post from prison. At that time, it wasn't a problem for activists to publish their articles while in prison through family members. My blog wasn't famous; some of my followers were people who knew me and activists from Youth for Change.

CHAPTER THREE

The Inception of a Movement

A few hours after I was released from the detention center where my torture had taken place, I was flooded with phone calls. Since I couldn't access my phone for over a day, my colleagues assumed the worst. I briefly told a few of my closest friends what had happened, and they took me to the hospital. Wael Abbas—renowned Egyptian journalist, blogger, and human rights activist—heard that Egyptian state security had tortured me. He came to visit me and stressed the importance of immediately documenting my suffering. He told me that speaking out publicly would show the police that I was not afraid and that I was determined to continue my activism.

At first, I was hesitant. After being tortured, I was afraid of what the state security would do if I spoke out against them. Abbas insisted that my interview would serve as protection against future torture and help the ongoing repression against movement activists backfire against the government. Our lawyers gave me the same advice. I mustered up courage and agreed to the interview. I knew it was time to reveal to the world that the state security was bent on punishing me for organizing the April 6 strike. The interview was also a personal statement that I was willing to take a public leadership role in resistance and not just organize anonymously. We recorded the interview in Hisham Mubarak Center for Human Rights, and Abbas' questions guided me through telling my story.[1] He took pictures of my bruised face, torn clothes, and destroyed car.

Abbas was one of the only people in Egypt covering demonstrations as

early as 2004. He was a member of Youth for Change, and I had first met him at meetings in 2005. We began sitting together almost every evening in cafes in the Borsa area of Cairo and, over time, became good friends. He was photographing the protests happening in Egypt and posting them on his blog, Al-Wae' Al-Masri ("Egyptian Awareness"). He became a recognizable and reliable source of information as various news outlets referred to or borrowed from his posts. Initially, Abbas was against the idea of using Facebook for political activities and preferred using blogs which, for him, were like free public newspapers that anyone could access without the need to register. And so, he published the interview with me on his blog.[2]

This video interview drew a lot of attention and sparked interest in the April 6 Movement. It was time to clearly articulate our plans to the world. I was eager to not repeat the mistakes made by Youth for Change. Our first challenge was to determine how April 6 would be different from previous movements. Every day, movements arise and disappear the next, and we had to ensure ours would survive and thrive. Words were no longer the solution and charisma no longer moved the masses. What we needed was a sound strategy. We began to intently research in order to learn from the experience of others.

Building a Movement: Foundation and Organization

My main goal after the general strike was to establish a movement that would endure in spite of repression or leadership changes. I organized all the active members on the Facebook page into groups. Some were involved in media production, others in making a database of our members. We needed lawyers and people who could fundraise and reach out to human rights organizations. We needed resources to buy essential supplies like pens, paper, and flags. To raise money, we asked for donations from our members, supporters, and political figures. When we held meetings, we asked everyone attending to pay five Egyptian pounds (approximately 30 cents). We also placed a penalty fee of two Egyptian pounds on anyone who smoked during the meeting. Many gladly smoked to pay the fee.

A number of members advocated for the establishment of a formal

political institution or party, but I advised against it. Doing so would mean its immediate shutdown by the authorities. In practice, political parties in Egypt are heavily constrained by the existing state-of-emergency laws. The government retains the right to control many aspects of a political party, including its leaders and activities. The state-of-emergency laws also allow the government to arrest people without charges and makes it illegal for more than five people to gather without a license from the government. The government can freeze a party's activities and even dissolve a political party if it so chooses. A social movement, on the other hand, cannot be shut down as easily because such an entity is not defined under Egyptian punitive law. The government does not know all its members, and with no fixed address or headquarters a social movement can operate more freely and effectively.

Our movement became known officially as the April 6 Movement. Since it was formed by young people who loved Egypt, April 6's slogan became "Youth Loving Egypt." The state-controlled media was portraying us as a bad influence on the country that was trying to create chaos and destruction. We wanted to show the country that we were a group of young people who loved Egypt and wanted to take the future into our own hands. We did not have ulterior political ambitions. Our slogan attracted many young Egyptians. Every decision was determined by a majority vote while respecting minority opinions, imitating the ideal future democracy that our movement wanted to build in Egypt. Older members of political organizations called us children. I would say, "Yes, we are children. Let's play." Our goal was to bring about a revolution in three years.

The media began to anticipate what we, "the Facebook guys," would do next. After many years of standstill in tiny protests in Egypt, the April 6 strike shook up the political arena. We had become popular throughout the country. The independent media, journalists, and bloggers were covering our every move. They were reporting on the protests we were organizing and whenever our members were arrested. The national newspaper was totally controlled by the state, and their reporting on our activities was always negative. State security was intent on shutting down our Facebook group which had called for the general strike. They had successfully shut down all other groups on Facebook and Yahoo that were affiliated

with the general strike, and so a friend and I decided to secretly take charge of the main Facebook group. In case I was arrested, the Facebook group would still be active.

My contribution when the movement formed was managerial. I had studied construction and project management, and as a civil engineer I knew how to design a project. First, I would draw up a vision to be followed by a plan and, finally, an achievable timetable that would consider available resources in order to implement the plan and bring us a step closer to the vision. I would develop a broad vision and then outline the specific tasks required to achieve that vision, including the planning and delegation of responsibilities. As I am not one to give emotionally arousing speeches, I tried to use my own technical skillset to further our movement. We all had our own place within this movement.

Within the April 6 Movement, various subcommittees evolved that were taking care of flyers, paintings, graffiti, statements, and organizing street activities and other logistics. We also designed t-shirts and cups to raise money. We were supported by Ahmed Seif, who was a human rights lawyer and the father of Alaa Abdel Fattah, and Khaled Ali, who was the head of the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights. Khaled Ali provided us legal services dedicated to fighting for the release of our arrested members. Ahmed Seif and Khaled Ali gave us unrestricted access to both their centers. Khaled Ali continues to support us still, even though it is extremely dangerous to work in human rights in Egypt these days.

Women were also central to our movement, comprising 15 to 25 percent of our membership. Our movement was an anomaly in Egyptian political life at a time when women did not play leadership roles in politics. Leaders of the old political parties in Egypt are traditionally old men, and the strong presence of women in the April 6 Movement changed the idea that women do not have agency and need to stay away from politics. Women in Egypt are heavily constrained by their families from participating in political activities that might prove dangerous; fear of rape after their arrest always weighs heavily on the minds of the families. Families expect women to constantly inform the elders in their household about their whereabouts. If they are found participating in political activities, they may be punished—anything from being married off to being

prohibited from leaving the house. Many women are obliged to denounce their public activities afterward. Yet despite these restrictions, women in our movement worked harder than men and stood on an equal footing when it came to making decisions or taking up leadership roles. Isra Basbessa and Amal Sharaf secured funding from members and political figures. Esma Mahfouz managed media relations. They took charge of all administrative tasks and enabled the movement to set up training and workshops. Women were integral in managing public relations, movement communication, and human resources.

The Ascent of the April 6 Movement Until Our First Anniversary

I spent the night of May 3 in an internet cafe organizing our first event following the April 6 strike that was planned for May 4, 2008. It was Mubarak's birthday, and we named it "The Day of Rage." The Muslim Brotherhood announced in the week before this protest that they would be participating. Frankly, they were trying to hijack our protest. Some political parties supported us, while others condemned us. Criticisms about Mubarak abounded in the streets as well as on the internet. Minor confrontations between police and protesters took place on university campuses. I was disappointed with the lack of larger mobilization, but I reckoned that the publicized event was a good stepping stone in launching our movement. The next day, our male colleagues who were arrested on April 6 were finally released. Esraa Abdel Fattah and Nadia Mabrouk had been freed two weeks earlier. Esraa announced publicly that she would not be joining our movement, and I understood her decision. Her family was furious after her arrest and that probably contributed to her renouncing all public activities. Most who had been released remained active in our movement.

After the April 6 strike, I was essentially out of a job. Throughout April, I was constantly hiding from state security, and this brought to a halt my business that I had started in 2007. After being released from prison on May 8, I began to search for another job and secured a position as a planning engineer in a construction company that gave me the opportunity to travel every ten days or so to governorates around Egypt. This enabled me

to connect with a broad base of people outside of Cairo and invite them to join our movement.

Mohammed Abdal Kodous, who led the Freedom Committee for the defense of prisoners in the Journalists Syndicate, supported us through thick and thin. He had opened the hall and cafeteria of the Journalists Syndicate for us to hold meetings. We were organizing frequent meetings online and in person. We preferred to meet in public parks and gardens because it ensured a certain level of privacy as well as fresh air and a green space. We also organized a large number of potlucks in these gardens. All these gatherings and discussions were important in imagining our activism and defining the vision and the actions of our movement. Laying the groundwork at this stage—focusing more on discussion and planning than street activism—was essential and, in hindsight, a necessary precursor for successful organizing and actions later on. We would symbolize the young, carefree generation of activists and not the serious suit-and-tie activists that are busy writing articles and holding debates. This attracted a lot of young people who had not been involved in politics.

We hosted our first conference on June 28, 2008, at the Journalists Syndicate. We invited the heads of all political parties to attend to ignite the idea that the youth wanted to talk and the older generation must listen. We also invited Arabic and Egyptian media. Hundreds of April 6 members agreed to appear publicly. At the conference, we solicited membership applications from all in attendance.

I gave the keynote address, detailing our dreams for a better Egypt. I described our goals of attaining freedom of speech, freedom of religion, equality, democracy, and a new constitution. I wanted to make it clear that we were not interested in establishing a political party and did not want to get caught up in the endless debate about the superiority of one economic system over another. I shared that the April 6 Movement was interested in political reform and we were willing to cooperate with anyone who shared our dream of a better future for Egyptians.

Mohammed Mahmoud then spoke about welfare policies, including the need to establish housing associations that would work to decrease housing prices. One of the biggest problems faced by young Egyptians is the cost of buying or renting an apartment. The price of raw materials

for construction such as cement, steel, and sand were very high at the time. After 2003 and the war in Iraq, many young Iraqis fled to Egypt, which caused the housing prices to double. In Egyptian culture, when a young man finishes his education, he has to get married. In order to find a wife, he is obliged to first buy an apartment. Housing is thus an indispensable part of Egyptian family life. Since access to affordable housing is crucial, Mohammed proposed the revival of Egyptian cooperative housing. This was already part of Egyptian law but had become obsolete with the dominance of the unrestricted free market and high levels of corruption among bureaucratic and political elites. This law allows the formation of an association of people who can buy land for almost 50 percent less than the dictate of the free market, thus enabling young Egyptians to acquire affordable houses. April 6 also invited agricultural specialists to put forth their ideas to increase efficiency and supply of flour to fix the bread crisis in Egypt.

Our conference demonstrated to people that we were interested in finding real solutions to real problems, and not just creating chaos or disorder as the state-owned news media portrayed. We wanted to show the people that we had a vision for addressing systemic economic problems and that protests were one of many tools to realize this vision.

After the conference, we created the students' committee within the movement. Mustafa, my brother, was responsible for the student committee at Cairo University. We organized flash mobs, parties, and concerts to attract university students and we recruited many new members. We were deemed to be clowns by the state-run media and other established opposition activists—not intellectually adept to address serious political issues. Our discussions and speeches were simple and not shrouded in complex theories of Marx like the communists, Locke like the liberals, or Khalifa like the Islamists. We channeled this image to our advantage in two ways. First, if we were clowns, we were not taken as seriously. This meant that we had more freedom to organize without as much scrutiny from the government. Second, if we were clowns, humor and satire were part of the resistance toolkit drawing more young people to our side. We were the only active organization that was using tactics of resistance that went beyond conferences.

We quickly realized that we needed a big event to draw in new members and broaden our appeal and impact. We wanted to choose a day that was already well known so that we could backpack on it to have people join us. Thus, we chose July 23, which was celebrated as the Day of Revolution. On this day in 1952, a group of military officers led by Mohammed Naguib and Gamal Abdel Nasser led a successful coup that overthrew King Farouk and abolished the monarchy. Ever since, the same military institutions have controlled Egypt and the national celebrations that commemorate their achievements. Newspapers and other media outlets began to report that April 6 was planning something on July 23. This news, rather than stoking fears, raised people's interest. We refrained from calling Nasser's takeover a coup because Nasser was widely respected, both by Egyptians and the government. Our history books taught us that Nasser freed Egypt of corruption, and we wanted the idea of our protests to be focused on change and not provoke backlash by calling it a coup. Since it was a public holiday, more people would be able to join our event. Naturally, the government was in a bind. It could not ban people from going out on the streets since it wanted them to join its own staged public events.

In our first year, many of our members came from different political parties and were now all working together under the umbrella of our movement. April 6 had developed a strong base in Alexandria, where members were recommending that we hold an event outside of Cairo. So far, all of our big events had been centered in the capital. The group in Alexandria began preparing the event in secret, led by Yusuf Shaban and Mehnour, members of the Revolutionary Socialist Party, and Ahmed Nassar, part of the El-Ghad party in Alexandria. They were also coordinating with other members, such as Mohammed Mahmoud, Ahmed Midzy and Basem Fathy.

Our plan was to start the protest at the beach in Alexandria city carrying the Egyptian flag, singing the revolution songs from 1952, and flying kites. From the beach we would walk through the streets of Alexandria, continuing our merry protest across the city. However, when we started at the beach, the police found us and destroyed our kites. The rest of the day was a game of cat and mouse. We tried organizing spontaneous protests through text messaging, but the police kept chasing and finding us—perhaps they were tracking our phones—so we kept on regrouping.

Since we had planned our event in secret, the police did not know for certain what we planned to do next. We were using public transportation to move from one point to another. About 300 people coming from different governorates took part in the flash-mob protests across the city. As we continued with these ad hoc and fast-moving protests, we frustrated the police, who were unable to halt the protests completely.

By midday, some of us started to go missing, and we realized the police were arresting people. We immediately sent all the women back to Cairo using secure transportation and called our lawyers. They advised me to hide, because if I was arrested the police's case against the protesters would be complete. They had charged those arrested with establishing an illegal organization, and they needed the leader to prove their charges. Without me, it would be easier to help my arrested colleagues get out of prison. The state security in Alexandria is tougher than the police in Cairo. They were known to have tortured Salafis and Islamists to gain information, more so than the police in Cairo. Or so the stories went.

About twenty of us hid in a rented apartment in Alexandria for the night and planned to follow up on the fate of our colleagues in the morning. The next day, we joined demonstrations organized by the lawyer Mohammed Ramadan to show to the police that we were still there. We wanted to make a statement that they had not gotten rid of us and we were not scared. After participating in flash mobs in different parts of the city all morning, we took rest in the afternoon.

I was sipping on juice in a cafeteria when some secret police officers arrived. Within a matter of seconds, I was thrown into a car and taken away with a proficiency that any respectable thief would envy. The state security had found me. I spent about two hours in the police station but to my great surprise, no one touched me or talked to me. All I heard were passing comments from men in the room about how I had made a huge mistake coming all the way from Cairo to Alexandria. A few hours later, I was taken to a prosecutor in Alexandria who interrogated me about establishing a political movement. He accused me of organizing protests without official authorization, insulting the government, and disturbing public order. He told me I would be detained for 15 days with all the others who were arrested.

Fourteen of our members were arrested and taken to Burj Al-Arab Prison.* When I joined all those who had been arrested that evening in the prison, it was a distinctly amusing moment. Everyone began screaming greetings with palpable excitement on their faces. That night, we played games and made jokes and sang songs in jail at the police station. We were not placed in individual cell rooms. They tried but we refused. We said, "You can beat us if you want, but we will not be separated. We had two extremely witty guys with us—Medhat Shaker and Yusuf Shaban—who were writing songs on the spot against Mubarak, and we were singing them through the night. One such song was the "Spring Song"—we even decided to sing this song when we entered the court. The lyrics go "it's spring, the weather is awesome, don't talk about anything else."[3] The next morning, prisoners from the Muslim Brotherhood complained to me that our voices prevented them from focusing on their evening prayers. I became like a big brother, especially to those who had been arrested for the first time. We spent all our time in jail drawing cartoons, singing funny songs, and playing football with other prisoners.

The police were unusually kind to us, allowing us to enjoy ourselves. They even refrained from beating us. Our actions had garnered a lot of media attention, and the police wanted to show the West that they respected our human rights. Overall, the time in prison allowed us to socialize and keep our spirits high, and it was not as bad as we had feared.

When I was traveling to Alexandria, I had lied to my wife, telling her that I was busy with work. I had also lied to my mother, promising her earlier that I would stop all my political activities. I had said half-truths to my new boss, excusing myself from work by saying that I had to go to Alexandria because of my aunt's death. My aunt had indeed passed away in Alexandria after battling against cancer, but there were reasons for my visit other than personal mourning. Now I had to tell everyone the whole truth. My brother, who had also joined protest actions in Alexandria, had been one of the people arrested, and I would have to tell my mother and my wife about it. I would also need to extend my leave from work after my

* Those arrested were Mahenour El Masry, Basem Fathy, Yusuf Shaban, Mustafa Maher, Amr Ali, Ahmed Afifi, Medhat Shaker, Motasem Ahmed, Karime Adel, Ahmed Eraqi Nassar, Ahmed Abdel Wahab, Mohammed Taher, and Ahmed Maher.

colleagues were arrested so I could follow up with lawyers and work on getting them released. When my mother and wife learned of our arrests through the media—including *BBC Arabic* and *Al Jazeera*—their anger had no bounds. No one was allowed to visit us in prison. My wife was very upset and worried about yet another arrest of her husband and feared the worst given the infamous reputation of Alexandria's police. My mother was extremely sad that both her sons were now in jail. She had raised us to be decent and honest people and was heartbroken to see us now languishing in prison. But it was precisely because of the decency she instilled in us that we had to be in prison.

On the upside, the flash mobs that we organized in Alexandria made us more visible and quite popular throughout Egypt. We were famous among the youth and infamous among the state officials. The more they oppressed us, the more people we attracted to our cause. We focused on refining our message of nonviolent mobilization against repression, and continued educating ourselves through movies, documentaries, books, and the lived experiences of revolutionaries such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. The movie *Bringing Down a Dictator* about the student movement Otpor and its successful resistance against Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic, as well as the film *V for Vendetta*, inspired us. The Academy for Change aided us through organizing online courses to train activists in nonviolent organizing, movement-building, and nonviolent resistance strategies.*

We decided to hold a live conference in November 2008, set to take place at the same time as the annual conference of the ruling party. Their conference was headed by Gamal Mubarak, the son of the president, who was groomed by his father to be Egypt's next ruler. The purpose of their conference was to lie to the Egyptian people by bragging about economic growth, job creation, completed and planned infrastructure projects, progress in education, and even improvements in human rights—all falsehoods designed to legitimize the regime. The government officials would highlight statistics often taken out of thin air and incomprehensible to the general public. It was sheer propaganda based on fabricated government "facts."

* This was created by Egyptians living in Qatar, Lebanon and Jordan who made websites to inspire change. They disappeared after the 2013 military intervention in Egypt.

We had tried renting a place to host our alternative conference, but public theaters and halls refused. So we decided to hold it virtually, over the internet. After all, the internet was our headquarters, our home, and our life. This would be the first ever online conference in Egypt. Members from our organization worked really hard to get the technology and necessary equipment for this conference in place.

Our conference was also the first conference that explicitly aimed to discredit the ruling party's lies. It brought us a lot of attention. Many opposition newspapers, as well as international media outlets such as *BBC Arabic* and *Al Jazeera*, covered our conference. The cost to run the conference was minimal because it was online. We just needed cameras and the internet. Individual donations covered digital cameras, fast wireless routers, and other equipment. In our conference discussions and presentations, we used data from the records kept by opposition parties and NGOs. This data was a result of research conducted independently from the government. Our speakers were the leaders of opposition parties and the moderators came from human rights and social rights organizations. Our schedule was exactly aligned with the National Democratic Party's schedule. When Gamal Mubarak spoke about education, so did we. When he spoke of economic success, we highlighted the truth of their economic failures. When he bragged about healthcare, we spoke about the sad reality of Egyptians' health and living conditions. We countered his misleading statistics with our own facts. Many experts who joined our conference not only spoke about the true state of our country but also provided concrete recommendations and solutions.

At the end of the conference, we called for people to come out to the streets to celebrate what is known as Egyptian Valentine's Day, which falls each year on November 4. Egypt was our valentine, and we asked people to show their love for her in public and celebrate on the streets.

We had announced the day before our conference that we would go to Tahrir Square to have a feast in celebration of Egypt. We decided to go to Azhar— a very large public park in Cairo—as we thought our small gathering would not interfere with traffic and the government would not feel threatened by these actions. However, the regime left nothing to chance. When we entered the streets in downtown Cairo, the police surrounded

us and told us we needed approval, even to celebrate our love for our country. We ignored them and went to gather in Azhar where hundreds of soldiers were sent to arrest us.

Most of my arrested colleagues were released the next day. By then, our event had become big news. Media outlets reported that people from April 6 wanted to celebrate Egypt and their love for her but the police arrested them. Naturally, many Egyptians were indignant. The regime's zeal to repress us and our skillful exploitation of their blind violence furthered popular support for us. More people were drawn to our message, and the movement kept getting bigger. There is so much a movement can do to make repression backfire against an oppressive regime and help build a movement.

As 2008 was coming to an end, the war in Gaza began. Gaza was set on fire when Israeli authorities began their incursion into the strip. People from all over the world traveled to Egypt in support of Gaza. The organization CODEPINK was trying to enter Gaza to provide aid but was blocked by the Egyptian authorities.* In coordination with CODEPINK, we organized marches and flash mobs throughout Cairo. CODEPINK taught us how to coordinate flash mobs that would ultimately coalesce into a common square, thus hindering the ability of the security forces to contain or disperse the protests. Flash mobs are more spontaneous than organized protests and thus more difficult for the police to track, much like a game of whack-a-mole. It is difficult for the police to repress so many different protests spread out all throughout the city, especially as they join each other and become stronger. We would use this new organization technique for flash mobs to coalesce into a square in the future revolution.

In February 2009, we organized our first big event spread across universities throughout Egypt. February 21 is known as Students Day in Egypt, marking the massacre of students at Cairo University in 1938 who were protesting against the Egyptian government and the British troops in the country. To this day, the state security controls everything that happens at universities. Based on secret reports about the political affiliations of

* CODEPINK is a women-led grassroots organization working to end US wars and militarism, and support peace and human rights initiatives.

professors and staff, state security determines who holds specific positions in the academic and administrative hierarchy of the university. If a faculty or staff member is considered a government opponent or their loyalty is deemed as even slightly wavering, they will not be able to succeed in their academic careers.

To challenge this entrenched system, we organized a red card protest. The idea came from soccer, where a red card is given to a player to expel him from the game for misconduct. We handed these to the police standing outside universities as a symbol of our desire to expel them from our universities. It was a huge event—in both the number of people that turned out as well as the media attention it garnered—that enabled us to recruit many new members.

We spent the month of March preparing for our anniversary with a large event planned for April 6. We had to determine whether it would be a celebration, a protest, or a strike. I did not support the idea of another strike because we had not established effective communication with the workers as we had the previous year. Furthermore, the people of Mahalla were subjected to arrests and torture as a consequence of their strike in 2008. We took a vote and the majority chose a day of protest.

The day before the protest, the police arrested many of our members—especially those outside of Cairo. They wanted to show us how tough they were and so they spent the week prior to the expected protest beating our members and specifically targeting and arresting women from our group. I also met with the leaders of the Brotherhood at their headquarters for the first time a few days prior to our protest and asked them to join us. They told us that they did not want to participate directly against Mubarak as they feared retribution, but they would help us through their students in universities. Even though our demonstrations in 2009 were not as large as in 2008, they still succeeded in engaging many Egyptians and garnering their support.

Internal Divisions Come to a Head

To strengthen our strategic organizing, we reached out to the veterans of nonviolent resistance beyond Egypt's borders. We were invited by Otpor members—who a few years earlier brought down their own

"butcher" in Serbia—to attend courses to learn about organizing a resistance movement and to discuss their successes and failures. I was fully in favor of April 6 attending because I believed that we should be making use of every opportunity to learn. Mohammed Adil, one of our members, traveled to Serbia to attend the workshops. Around the same time, Basem Fathy and Ahmed Abdel Aziz Midzy—other leading April 6 members—traveled to the United States to learn from various NGOs about grassroots work and advocacy.* This was an annual conference organized by the US State Department in collaboration with Washington-based organizations like Freedom House to bring different civic groups and government delegations from all over the world to share ideas about the promotion of rule of law and good governance.

As soon as we began to travel abroad to learn from other movements, state security supported by some Nasserists and Islamists made a concerted effort to smear April 6's image.† They launched media campaigns designating us as Western spies. We were accused of advancing foreign interests through funding from abroad. The regime even began spreading a conspiracy theory that the CIA was behind the April 6 Movement. The propaganda worked. In May 2009, Nasserists from the El-Karama party and Islamists from the Al-Aamal party, who were until then in opposition to the government, began to call for a split within our movement.

These political groups used our attendance at the workshops and conferences abroad to accuse us of colluding with Western powers and to designate us as their enemies. We had never accepted money from foreign entities and had only worked with organizations that provided training and shared with us their knowledge and skills. It was painfully ironic that these parties accused us of accepting foreign money when it was well known that they accepted funding from Hezbollah and Iran.

* The delegation also included many journalists and even members of the ruling party, but this was not reported by the media.

† Nasserists and Islamists always publicly criticized the West, from public speeches against the West to spreading conspiracy theories. Thus, when we traveled to the US and Serbia to learn from other activists, they felt that we were going against their public preaching of anti-American and anti-European rhetoric. They claimed that April 6 was no longer a part of the opposition.

Around that time, our Facebook messages were hacked and all our private chats were published. They cut and edited what we had written to change the meaning of what we were saying in these private conversations. If we ever joked about someone, they would send that chat to the person. The government also placed people within our organization to sow internal discord. Further, there were people that were calling for a split within the movement along ideological lines.

Meanwhile, by 2009, the Kefaya movement under the leadership of Abdelhalim Qandeel, a Nasserist, had become very weak. It began representing only the Nasserists and their nationalism. For instance, when Ayman Nour traveled to the United States, Qandeel publicly criticized him. The liberals felt that they had no voice within Kefaya, as they were now firmly representing only nationalist views. Kefaya was essentially closed to April 6 and any type of partnership between the two movements. We needed to find or create an organization that could become a linchpin uniting various opposition political parties and movements under one umbrella. Thus, the National Association for Change was established. Professor Hassan Nafa, a political science professor with liberal and socialist leanings, became the general coordinator of the association. The National Association for Change was also supported by Ayman Nour from the El-Ghad party and Dr. Osama al-Ghazalli Harb, the leader of the Democratic Front Party. Qandeel, the leader of Kefaya, rejected the idea of collaborating with the new association, which placed the Nasserists squarely in opposition to our movement.

This experience of discord within April 6, as well as the split with Kefaya, was a wake-up call for me. I realized the need to establish a permanent opposition front with a unified vision. This would ensure that our movement was not pulled under the ideological wing of another political party like Al-Aamal, El-Karama, or the Arab Nationalist Party. We did not want to become another political party because political parties in Egypt are not credible in the eyes of the Egyptian people. They have all been around for a long time, either selling out to the government or playing political games that yield no concrete results. Given that April 6 was no more than an umbrella encompassing a wide range of ideologies,

we rewrote our vision and constitution based on the socialist democratic leanings of the majority of our members.

We created central committees for about fifteen governorates in Egypt, the majority of which were in Cairo and Alexandria. These committees would take charge of organizing all protest activities in their respective areas. The size of each committee depended on the number of members from that governorate. For instance, in a governorate with fifty members, the central committee would have five members. The committee in Cairo was much bigger while the committees in other governorates around Egypt were much smaller. Every day, one or two members from Cairo's central committee would connect online with members throughout Egypt using Yahoo! Chat.

To prevent internal strife, our movement placed a control on membership by stipulating that any member belonging to another political party could not officially be a member of April 6. We would cooperate with them but they would not have an official say in the internal decisions of April 6. Islamists should join an Islamic party while communists should join a communist party. We would not allow for any more ideological push and pull that would benefit political parties within our movement. Overall, the impact of doing this was positive for our movement because even though we lost members who were in political parties, our movement was no longer a recruiting ground for those members' own parties. It allowed us to establish permanence, and political parties were now unable to pull us under their own wing.

We organized our second online conference in November 2009, known as *Al-Qella Al-Mundasa* ("A Few Troublemakers"). The political parties and official state media had deemed us to be just a handful of troublemakers, and so we gladly embraced that slander. This conference helped us to shed the cloud of negativity that had engulfed our movement over the previous few months. As our members became active again, we organized a ceremony using the headquarters of the El-Ghad party. I made a deal with party officials in El-Ghad and the Democratic Front Party that we would cooperate only under the condition that they would not attempt to control or hijack our movement. We were continually supported by the Hisham Mubarak Center, Egyptian Center for Social and Economic

Rights, and Arabic Network for Human Rights Information. They gave us technical, logistical, and legal support from then to 2019.

2010: A Year Of Hope And Renewed Activism

2010 abounded with protests. Sarcastic videos, revolutionary songs, clashes with the police, and flash mobs spread every day across Egypt. Our momentum and membership grew exponentially every single day of the year.

We hoped this year would be a turning point for Egyptian politics. To mark the beginning of the year, we created a banner that read "2010: Year of Change. Are you ready?" that we hung during a party that we organized in the Ayman Nour Center. We embraced and wanted to show our optimism about Egypt's future. It was also the year when the parliamentary elections were scheduled in Egypt.

We decided to hold our first event of the year on January 25, also known as Police Day in Egypt. Each year on that day, we celebrate the sacrifices of Egyptian police officers who in 1952 had refused to surrender and were killed by the British army while defending a police station. In 2010, the prime minister declared it a national holiday. We did not believe that the police in our time should be hailed as heroes. We found it unacceptable that our country would celebrate a police force that actively jailed, tortured, and repressed its own people. They were the ones who would fabricate charges against nonviolent protesters and torture them. They were the ones who protected Mubarak's corrupt regime and stood as the reactionary vanguard against change.

We renamed this day appropriately: "Thugs Day." I received calls from many police officers urging me to reconsider. However, I stayed firm and told them that we want to express our discontent against the police and the minister of interior. Hundreds of April 6 members, activists from Youth for Change and El-Ghad, and other independent activists began protesting near the prosecutor's office; we clashed with the police. At first, they threatened to arrest us, and we responded that we were ready to be arrested. A higher-ranking officer showed up and said to his colleagues, "Let them be." To my surprise, they allowed us to continue our protests. I believe the police

realized that if they arrested us that day, they would be proving our point and thus would legitimize our protests. They were thugs alright, but smart ones—at least on that day.

In February of 2010, Mohamed ElBaradei announced that he would return to Egypt and run as a candidate in the presidential elections scheduled for 2011. We were thrilled and threw our full support behind *The Popular Initiative for Baradei*—a coalition of people that had connected online to support Baradei's candidacy. April 6 began to collaborate with other activists and organizations calling for Baradei's return. Many people had been skeptical of participating in political activism because they saw no viable alternative to Mubarak. In our view, Baradei was the answer to all those people wondering who could replace him. I personally worked with the people spraying graffiti with supportive, welcoming messages throughout Cairo. On the day of his arrival, we organized a huge reception for Baradei at the airport.

We did most of our street activities such as spraying graffiti and distributing flyers after it got dark. The police were constantly on our tail and we were trying our best to avoid arrest. However, early in the morning of February 17, 2010, Amr Ali and I were stopped at a police checkpoint while we were overseeing graffiti in Cairo. We were taken to the Giza police station. They took away my phone, not knowing that I had an extra one that I hid earlier in my underwear. While at the police station, I secretly called my friends informing them of our arrest. Within half an hour, protesters and media had gathered around the police station demanding our release. The police charged us with insulting the president and encouraging unrest, but these charges were eventually dropped and we were released two days later. The police yet again stole all my belongings and destroyed my car.

By that point, people were joining us every day—hundreds of thousands online and hundreds in protests—because of our campaign in support of ElBaradei. Our visible growth sent a dangerous message to the regime, threatening their legitimacy. This growth was a double-edged sword since increased growth requires increased efforts. Furthermore, being bigger meant that we would have a bigger target on our back from the regime. However, associating with Baradei gave us certain protections. He was

well known in the international community, which made the government think twice about any action that could hurt their image in the West.

April 6 became one of the main groups working for Baradei. I met with Baradei twice, and both times I gauged that his goals aligned with ours. He envisioned change through nonviolent means. According to him, the first thing that we needed to achieve was constitutional change. Without changing the rules of the game, we would not win. When Baradei and his supporters came up with the idea of a petition calling for constitutional change and the protection of democratic rights and freedoms, we helped gather hundreds of thousands of signatures in support of the petition. Egyptians were asked to sign a petition with their true names and include their national ID numbers. They were doing it in droves, showing that they had shed their fear of the regime and openly supported a positive change.

I was fired immediately after my arrest. Owners of private businesses deeply feared reprimand from state security. Professor Mahmoud Hamza, who supported activities against the Mubarak regime, agreed to employ me in his company. He also offered us his villa in downtown Cairo as headquarters of our movement. We named this villa "The Cave" and began planning activities for the Baradei campaign and for our coalition platform for the National Association for Change.

It was soon time to plan the second anniversary of April 6. We wanted to organize an event in support of Baradei and his calls for change. We had a list of seven demands that we wanted to present to the Parliament. This time around, we first consulted our lawyer, Gamal Eid, regarding the emergency law that had been in place in Egypt since 1958 and that prevented the gathering of more than four people from demonstrating without first having secured an official government permission. Gamal told us that no one had ever been granted that permission, but he said we should try anyway. We went to the minister of interior and submitted an application outlining the number of people, time, and place of our demonstration.

Mohammed Adil, Amr Ali, and I put down our names on the official request for a permit because we were already known by the media and it would be more difficult to arrest us. As expected, our request was rejected. The police warned us that anyone who joined or even encouraged this

protest would be immediately arrested. Four days prior to the demonstration on April 6, all three of us hid and shut off our phones. We bought new phones and sim cards and continued to supervise the preparation for the protest from a safe apartment in Cairo. As we had gained a lot of new members after joining the Baradei campaign, we had a strong base of supporters behind us. On the day of April 6, there were huge protests—about a thousand protesters in Cairo and hundreds in other governorates. The police arrested about a thousand protesters that day across Egypt, including my brother, but released them two days later. This demonstration was another big event in Egypt and sent shockwaves throughout the Egyptian media while the movement gained even more publicity and visibility.

In May, members of the ruling party had agreed to the police's use of actual firepower to repress protesters. We responded to this by organizing another set of protests outside the parliament building. The police prevented us from reaching the building, but not that many protesters were arrested. The police were still walking on eggshells, as they wanted to be perceived by the international community as respecting the civil, social, and human rights of their citizens. They wanted the Egyptian government and the police to appear liberal so that Western countries would not cut aid to the Egyptian government.

A new wave of activism began in Egypt after Khaled Said died in Alexandria police's custody on June 6, 2010. The official police report claimed that his death was a result of swallowing marijuana. We found this hardly believable since ingesting marijuana does not cause death. When photos of his face emerged—bruised, bloodied, and beaten black and blue—everyone knew what had happened. He was another everyday guy tortured and killed by the police in Egypt, without reason and without proof of his guilt. He had been stopped by local police officers who were demanding a bribe. He refused, after which they beat him to death. They believed that since he was unknown, his death would go unnoticed. They were wrong. His death was brought to the public along with the gruesome images proving his murder. This struck a chord in the hearts of Egyptians.

The uproar following his death led to the establishment of the Facebook group "We are all Khaled Said." I was in contact with the admin

of this Facebook page whose real name I did not yet know. I received an email from him in which he told me that he respected me and knew that I had also been tortured. The admin of this page supported our protests and the mobilization of people, and we began coordinating our events with this unknown figure. We organized many activities together throughout August and September 2010, communicating anonymously through Gmail.*

In the latter half of 2010, April 6 organized new activities and events every week as our membership continued to grow. We coordinated with the revolutionary socialists and joined hands with some liberal members of the Muslim Brotherhood who agreed to participate as individuals.† Young people from the El-Ghad Party, the Democratic Front Party, and the ElBaradei Campaign also joined our street protests and other events regularly.

In November, we held our third conference, Al-Qella Al-Mundasa ("A Few Troublemakers"), which was a huge success. It was a three-day online conference that included live broadcasts as well as recorded videos of experts. On the last day, we held the conference in person at the Democratic Front Party headquarters. The people that attended the ruling party's simultaneous conference were provided with free transportation, a good lunch, accommodation, and even some pocket money to spend. To attend our conference, not only did our supporters have to make their own arrangements, they also had to pay a donation to attend. We did not have the finances and resources to cover their expenses, but still attracted hundreds of people. By then, "a few troublemakers" had become many committed troublemakers.

2010 had been a year filled with planning, coordinating, organizing, going out on the streets, playing our game with regime thugs on the streets and holding our hopes high. We were all preparing for something big. We did not know what it would be but we knew it was coming. Then, on December 18, 2010, revolution ignited in Tunisia.

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* Later I heard that Wael Ghonim, a blogger I met at the Al Jazeera forum for bloggers in January 2011 (a few days before the revolution), was the admin.

† Two of these liberal members of the Muslim Brotherhood were fired from the organization and are currently in prison.

CHAPTER FOUR

Leave, Mubarak

The Days Before the Revolution

Before the revolution in Tunisia that started in December 2010, we had already begun planning for a second round of protests on January 25, 2011—Police Day in Egypt—that we successfully staged on the same day the previous year under the name "Thugs Day."

From October 2010 leading up to January 25, we were meeting daily to plan marches and flash mobs. The idea of linking social and economic demands such as a better life, better pay, and human dignity to political demands such as democracy had been a successful model of protest for us since 2008. This link remained the central idea of our protests. The most common and successful model of protests we used were flash mobs and spontaneous marches. Only about two or three protest leaders would know the route and the final destination of the protest, and the protesters would follow these leaders. The first leader would communicate with the second leader, confirming that there was no police presence, and more people would join. These events would last for about thirty to forty minutes. As we marched through the streets we would chant that there were no jobs, no food, and no hope; thus, we need to change the system. Our protesting was not limited to chants. Many people enacted street plays, singing, and acting to attract passersby. We banged on pots and pans to make noise, a method we had learned from the revolution in Chile. We sometimes stood and gave out plates of food to attract people.

We organized small protests every day, especially in the most impoverished neighborhoods of Cairo. Almost 40 percent of Egyptians live on less

than $2 a day, and these are the people who bear the brunt of a corrupt system. We went to Bolak El-Dakrour and Imbaba, important governorates in Giza. People in these neighborhoods live in abject poverty and face the harshest consequences of our corrupt system. Mobilizing people within these areas helped us build a strong foundation for future support and resistance growth. Although many people in these neighborhoods did not become official members of the April 6 Movement until after the revolution began, during late 2010, they supported our cause by protecting us on the streets and talking to people about our movement. These were the people who would come out on the streets first and be part of the revolution from the very first day.

We considered giving people in these areas food, money, and supplies as bribes, a tactic frequently used by those in power in Egypt. Since we were not as well-funded as the ruling party or the Muslim Brotherhood, we could not give them a lot of food or supplies. We instead focused on helping people solve their problems, such as their shortages of water and electricity. We would help them advocate for these problems, negotiate with the local councils, and help install irrigation systems.

We had realized that ideological and academic speeches do not move the masses. Poorer Egyptians are concerned with the next meal on their table, not the ideas of Marxism or communism. When we went to the poor neighborhoods, we talked to people about their daily suffering, not about a revolution. In our protests, we focused on the rising price of bread.

Whenever we protested in late 2010, people spread flyers about the April 6 Movement or supporting the ElBaradei Campaign. Some members who were not recognized by the police would go around the crowds as ordinary civilians talking to people to gain their feedback after witnessing the protests. People were generally in agreement with us, saying that, "These youngsters are right. They are telling the truth." This enabled us to build the credibility of the April 6 Movement and ElBaradei Campaign as the group of people who wanted a better Egypt. We were building our credibility for some event in the future, but in late 2010, we did not know what exactly it would be. It was not until January 25 that we realized that our credibility had paid off.

On New Year's Eve 2010, there was an explosion at a church in

Alexandria that resulted in 23 casualties. This further outraged people who came out to protest at the spectacular failure of the security apparatus in Egypt to prevent such violence. The rage against the government in Egypt had grown immensely over the past year.

The police were avoiding detaining and arresting people during this time because people's rage was growing against them. They attempted to portray the image of Egypt as a democratic and tolerant state, while at the same time trying to prevent further spread of the protests. As the authorities in Egypt watched protests grow larger by the day in Tunisia, they did not want to spark any discontent among Egyptians that might turn into a full-fledged revolution.

We were constantly following the news coming out of Tunisia. Much like in Egypt, the Tunisian government tightly controlled the national narrative and suppressed the discussion of issues facing everyday people through censorship, intimidation, and persecution. However, in Tunisia too, the internet gave people the ability to voice their concerns and connect with other people with similar grievances. Social media was key to overcoming the government-imposed information blackout in Tunisia. Digital activists throughout Tunisia were publishing minute-by-minute developments in the protests, and this got picked up by international media broadcasters, especially *Al Jazeera*. We were trying to learn as much as we could from the protesters there through the YouTube videos they were posting.

We made hundreds of shields from plastic bottles to protect ourselves against the police attacks. We made face masks from clothes and used eyeglasses to protect against tear gas. We were spreading information about how to protect our bodies from police violence. Movies were an imperative tool that we used to spread our message. We would rent projectors to show movies about revolutions, such as *Gandhi*, which explained the idea of nonviolent civil resistance in India. We were showing documentaries and movies on the 1973 Chile revolution, especially in learning how to make use of symbolic resistance. We also held a lot of training sessions for newer members and people interested in joining protests on how to organize and participate in demonstrations. This training included courses on how to make shields and face masks. We showed

videos and gave speeches at the Hisham Mubarak Center and Egyptian Center for Social and Economic Rights. We held meetings and courses on cyber security at the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information. We used code words for certain activities so that it would be more difficult for the police to surveil our activities. We used the terms *al-azuma* ("invitation"), *al-waleema* ("feast"), and *al-hafla* ("party") for flash mobs and other events. The state security closely watched us but they did not attack us during this time, probably to avoid stoking anger further.

We had to take many precautions before the protest on January 25. I asked my wife to stay at her father's home since she was pregnant at the time and her mother had passed away the previous year. I began sleeping in my car and purchasing new SIM cards and phones as I had done before other big campaigns. Young lawyers and April 6 members met with volunteers and protesters to prepare them for arrests. We first told the newer volunteers and protesters that getting arrested was likely but that it would not be the end of the world. "If you are arrested," we would say, "you will ultimately be released within a matter of hours or days." We told them that on being arrested, they had the right to stay silent and should not divulge any information to the police. They should also not sign any forced confessions. We took contact information for people they knew who could be informed should they get arrested, and we told them to give the number of our lawyers to their families or trusted friends. We also told them to keep a message typed on their phone to immediately send to someone they trust if they were about to be arrested.

We used the offices of the Egyptian Center for Social and Economic Rights (led by Khaled Ali) and Hisham Mubarak Center for Human Rights (led by Ahmed Saif) as our headquarters and established a central control room. In this room, we set up computers, USB sticks for the internet, and phones, which would allow us to streamline our communication and coordination with different protests and activities taking place. Thousands of people called to ask about our protests and hundreds of journalists wanted to report our activities. Journalists from *Al Jazeera* were documenting the activities of the April 6 Movement at our headquarters. I told them I expected 5000 people to turn out on January 25 and that they should bring their cameras. I did not know then—and they would not have believed it

until they saw with their own eyes—that January 25 would in fact bring much greater numbers of ordinary Egyptians onto the streets.

Revolution Begins

On the day of January 25, we knew there would be a huge showdown with the police. However, the protests in Tunisia drove many Egyptians to finally express in public their collective longing for freedom and change and join the struggle—their own revolution—to realize that dream.

This year, we expected a larger turnout that we hoped would build on a huge base of supporters that we had gained over the previous year. The admin of the Khaled Said Facebook page had also called for protests against police brutality on January 25, 2011. Thus, we decided to organize unified protests on that day that would converge at Tahrir Square. The exact details of the protests were known by only a few people so that the government would not learn our exact plan beforehand.

Tahrir Square is an important landmark located in the heart of Cairo that has housed many significant protests in Egypt over the years. It was previously known as Ismailia Square, renamed to Tahrir Square by Nasser after the coup in 1952. Tahrir in Arabic means "liberation" and thus the square symbolizes the desire for freedom. People gathered in Tahrir during the bread riots of 1977 as well as the protests against the war in Iraq in 2003. It is an important gathering square, large enough to gather thousands of people. Protests in Tahrir Square become a matter of national concern, and the image of Tahrir Square full of protesters gives momentum to protests all around Egypt.

We had announced online and to the media that we would begin our protests from the main squares at 2pm. In reality, we would begin about one hour earlier from the poorer neighborhoods of Egypt like El-Mohandessin in Giza, which is about a one hour walk from Tahrir Square. Our strategy was to go to neighborhoods such as El-Mohandessin and call on people to join our marches against the government. We had organized in these neighborhoods before, and we knew that the people there supported us. However, it was still a gamble because we had not made public announcements and did not know if people would march with us. Since Egyptian security forces expected us to start our protests in Tahrir

Square or the Journalists Syndicate, they were taken by surprise when our protests began in neighborhoods like Giza and before the time we had publicly announced.

We established secure communications in order to execute the protests in various governorates effectively on that day. Until 2016, a SIM card could be purchased in Egypt without an ID. Thus, we constantly purchased new SIM cards to prevent being traced and surveilled. My known number stopped working on the evening of January 24 as security had blocked the SIM cards of many activists. Since we all kept secret phones and numbers that were not known by or registered with the police, I used mine to communicate with activists and friends. On the morning of January 25, I called all our point-people spread throughout the governorates and stayed in the control room until noon to make sure everything was set up.*

At noon, I went to Giza and found myself in the midst of several thousands of people who had come out to protest. I called the movement coordinators in other governorates, and they all told me that they were shocked to see huge turnouts in their own cities and regions. Back in Cairo, protests started in smaller alleys of the Mohandessin neighborhood and as we began heading toward Tahrir Square we gathered strength in numbers.

Our strategy of organizing in poor neighborhoods had succeeded. In these neighborhoods were the people who had suffered the worst under Mubarak. They had faced cruelty, deprivation, and torture. The government had failed to deliver on any of its promises to provide Egyptians with a better life. And now these were the people who were the first to shed their fear and join a protest. We called on them, "Come down, Egyptians. Come down." And so they did.

People were cheering us on from balconies and from the small spaces of narrow streets. Our march looked big. This gave confidence to entire families to join us and we were growing in size by the minute. Dozens of people turned into hundreds, and hundreds of people became thousands as many marches swept through the narrow streets of Cairo.

When we reached wider avenues, the marching crowds were large,

* Different activists were responsible for various governorates around Egypt. They were on the ground, part of our secure communication and organization network.

counted in the tens of thousands—way too large to be contained even if the police wanted to stop us. We walked for one hour, heading toward Tahrir Square, our march still growing in size with people joining us along the way. We urged marchers to avoid any clashes with the police, and we also wanted to protect the soldiers from the huge number of protesters. While walking, key movement members were constantly announcing that the protesters should not interact with the police.

At that time, the police avoided using lethal force against the protesters, resorting only to tear gas and water bombs. They were overwhelmed by the sheer number of people and were unable to disperse us. Eventually, after minor clashes, the police began to withdraw from the main avenues that connected to the square, and instead moved to secure buildings such as the Cabinet of the Ministers building, the Parliament, and the American Embassy. During the day, the police were trying to avoid direct clashes that could further provoke the anger of the people. They wanted to seem friendly. The police secured the Egyptian Radio and Television Union in the Maspero building, which was strategically important for the regime to control at times like this, as the battle over information can be as crucial for the ultimate victory as the battle in the street. Throughout the afternoon, cellphone networks were blocked or unavailable in the Tahrir Square area, and Twitter—which was important in spreading the news of the protests—was blocked throughout the country.

We were tens of thousands strong when we arrived at the square at 2pm, which gave us even more confidence. Once we reached Tahrir Square, we escalated our demands. We had so far been calling for changes in the government and the Minister of Interior, but the situation changed with so many people coming out to the streets. We could finally see our real power. Thousands protested all over Egypt. The main squares in Alexandria, Port Said, Delta, and Upper Egypt were all occupied by protesters that day. In Tahrir Square itself, by the end of the day, up to 70,000 people were present. We began chanting "*Ash-shab yurid isqat al-nizam*!" which translates to "the people want the downfall of the regime!"—a slogan inspired by protests in Tunisia. People were dancing and celebrating. We wanted to push for a sit-in and began to gather donations from people. We also attempted to form a large coalition to represent the youth of the

revolution. This coalition included activists from the April 6 Movement, Revolutionary Socialists, Democratic Front Party, ElBaradei Campaign, and others who had been part of organizing the 25th of January protests from the very beginning. In the evening, fireworks filled the skies and gave color to our revolution.

No stepping back. No regrets. This was revolution.

The police announced that they would allow us to gather until midnight, after which they would clear Tahrir Square, using violence if they deemed it necessary. As midnight approached, the police shot rubber bullets, used tear gas and concussion grenades, and began arresting large swathes of people. We all fled.

Dispersed, we quickly organized protests in other parts of Cairo. The police were trying to keep up with us and chased us around the city. Run, protest, hide. Repeat. We felt like Jerry the mouse running from Tom the police cat. We walked and ran over 30km from Tahrir Square, the center of Cairo, to Shubra, a governorate in the north of Cairo and in the opposite direction of where the police were attacking. This took us all night. I met almost every activist I had known since 2004 that night as thousands of people were running and escaping the police. Early in the morning, I dropped off Asmaa Mahfouz and went to hide.

Security was trying its best to contain the situation. They were on the hunt for protest organizers, although by that time arresting organizers would not have really stopped the mobilization. People were already galvanized, had tasted their freedom when they joined with thousands of others on the streets, and had become fearless. Those who had stayed home on the 25th felt they missed something big and went out the next day, joining many others. Meanwhile, I spent the next two days trying to evade arrest while still coordinating our activities.

The genie of freedom was out of the bottle. On January 26 and 27, the protests continued on the streets of Egypt, spontaneously led by ordinary people with no formal organization. This was a true sign that we were witnessing a real revolution. We were doing some organizing like private and secret meetings and discussions, but the majority of the protests across Egypt were simply the result of people coming out on the streets when the protest leaders were put in prison—even without calls

for action from us. This was a testament to the anger and frustration with the government among Egyptian people. Once the uprising started on January 25, it could not be easily extinguished. The Muslim Brotherhood announced on the 27th that they would be joining the protests starting on January 28. They had previously refused to participate, but once the protests proved successful, they changed their minds. They now felt that people were closer to overthrowing the regime and threw their own hats into the ring. We welcomed them as we knew that they were an important voice in the Egyptian community and that their support would give a boost to the revolution and help propel change.

We stopped meeting in our usual places, including the cave, and instead met in private homes and sometimes cafes downtown. The night of January 27, I hid in a police officers' building near Tora Prison. One of our members had audaciously rented a flat in this police compound. Who would suspect that the April 6 Movement organizers that the police so diligently chased had settled and planned a revolution at a police building in Cairo during a crucial time for the uprising. To enter the compound, we posed as students going over to study together. It was one of the safest places in Cairo to plan our event for the next day.

Friday, January 28, was the main day of the revolution. We squeezed ten passengers and plenty of shields into my old Fiat 128, and I dropped them off at different places to lead marches. I was part of the march from Imbaba in Giza. I chose Imbaba because it was close to where we had started our marches on January 25, and we had a lot of credibility among the people there. It was also an extremely crowded neighborhood with millions of people living in extreme poverty.

In Islam, men are encouraged to gather in the mosque on Friday for a congregational afternoon prayer which is preceded by a short *khutbah*, or sermon, by the *khatib*—the speaker, usually an imam, leading the prayer. Around 12:30pm on Friday, the government cut off the internet throughout the country so that activists would not be able to communicate and organize. However, since it was a Friday, most men throughout Egypt would be going to the mosques.

After the afternoon prayer that day, we began to chant. Thousands of people gathered around us in support and we began to move as one body

toward Tahrir Square. People from everywhere were trying to enter Tahrir Square using the Qasr El-Nil bridge, the main bridge that leads into the square. An epic battle ensued between protesters and the police.[1] Police vehicles with water cannons and a swarm of armed police with tear gas were battling us. We were armed with our water bottle shields, a lot of hope, and random food carts that we used as defensive shields and barriers. Many of us splashed vinegar or cola on our faces to quell the burning of tear gas. When the officers pushed against us, the will of the people had its own energy and we pushed them back. This tug of war went on until finally we pushed through to enter Tahrir Square.

The marches had begun from various mosques throughout Cairo and were joined by prominent opposition figures and leaders. The flow of people was unstoppable as hundreds of thousands of protesters were out on the streets coming from all directions. The police could not stop this current of people descending upon Tahrir Square. Clashes between the anti-riot police and protesters persisted as the police used tear gas, rubber bullets, and birdshot.* In the face of violence, some protesters used stones to break the police formation. These were not terror tactics, but rather a retaliation in the face of oppression. Whenever we saw people using violence, we went to reason with them to maintain our nonviolent strategic policy. We wanted to prevent innocent victims or even a civil war, and even when people were angry, we tried to reason with them to explain the tactical significance of nonviolent protests.

In Tahrir Square that evening, many of our colleagues and friends were covered in blood. Many of us had endured severe violence from the police.

18 Days of Revolution

It is difficult to describe how I felt that evening when we entered Tahrir Square for the second time since the revolution began. It was the kind of happiness that words cannot describe. Everyone present shared in this powerful feeling. We had started something from which we could not turn back, a fight with those in power—and if we did not succeed, they

* Birdshot is a round of lead pellets (of different diameters) used for killing birds. Since birds can scatter, using birdshot ensures you hit and kill as many birds or targets. It has been widely used since 2011 to shoot out the eyes of protesters by aiming at a crowd.

would kill us. Entering Tahrir Square again, stronger than ever, was a key breakthrough for our revolution.

We felt that a dream that had been distant for so many years was now within our reach. We were finally at the turning point of history. This time we knew we sacrificed too much to be here, at this symbolic square, to leave without achieving the ultimate victory. It happened naturally that people decided to remain at Tahrir Square and turn it into the symbol of a future Egypt.

A new way of life developed in the square as people set up tents. Everyone wanted to help. People were bringing blankets and other supplies. The most organized groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, April 6, and the Ultras took charge of managing the logistics and began to collect donations to sustain this massive sit-in.* We collected tents, blankets, medical supplies, and food to make sure people were able to stay in Tahrir Square. We even placed plastic sheets and rugs across the roundabout and pavements for people to sleep on.

Tahrir Square became a self-organized community run on the principles of equality, nondiscrimination, nonviolence, mutual aid, and public transparency—everything that we imagined in our future country. Everyone was helping each other. No one focused on their ideological differences. Atheists and Islamists were sharing their meals. There were no complaints or reports of sexual harassment. People were not throwing trash to avoid littering the place. It was the utopia we wanted to live in.

It did not matter who you were when you were in Tahrir Square—rich or poor, man or woman, socialist or conservative—everyone there lived in harmony. Coptic Christians would stand guard in front of Muslims when they prayed, and Muslims would do the same for Christians when they held mass.

People ran makeshift health clinics serving anyone that needed help. People organized themselves into groups responsible for collecting trash,

* Ultras were hardcore football fans in Egypt who supported the al-Ahli and Zamalek teams in Egypt. The Ultras were an organized group whose members were routinely arrested and tortured by the police. On January 26, they stood bravely against the police. They did not have ideological or political backgrounds. They would be part of the revolution until the very end.

maintaining tents, operating heat generators, and distributing water. Others got busy arranging the stage and speakers, checking people entering the square for weapons, and setting up an information wall with the newspaper pages reporting on the revolution.

There was a main stage set up that we called the Speakers' Corner where people went to call for action. Beside the stage there was a white screen playing televised speeches given by the government. A memorial for those who died at the hands of the police was set up—the Wall of Martyrs—in which their pictures and stories were put up. There was also a kindergarten organized by mothers in the middle of the square, since schools in Cairo were closed during the protests.

Meanwhile, we formed a revolutionary youth coalition to represent the interests of the people in the square. The coalition included members of the Revolutionary Socialists, the Democratic Front Party, ElBaradei Campaign, and young members of the Muslim Brotherhood who had been part of the protests from the very beginning.* We found out that some people who were on Mubarak's side began to claim that Mubarak should be given another chance and that we should let him finish his time in office. We wanted to create this coalition to make sure that our voices were not drowned out by Mubarak supporters. We wanted to make it clear to the government that we were here to stay.

On January 28, Mubarak imposed a curfew and deployed army units. Egypt's security apparatus can be divided into three leading institutions: Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Defense, and General Intelligence. The Ministry of Interior is responsible for Egypt's police force, including state security and riot police. The Ministry of Defense is in charge of the armed forces and the special military intelligence unit. Finally, the General Intelligence is headed by the President. The police had withdrawn after their failed attempt to crush the protests. The army completely surrounded Tahrir Square but promised publicly that they would not fire on protesters. They said that the army and the people were one. While the police were blamed for most of the bloodshed, the army tried to show itself to be on the side of the people. After the bread riots in 1977, Sadat had

* These members of the Muslim Brotherhood had supported protests on their own volition and not on the orders of the Muslim Brotherhood.

increased the power of the police to prevent future unrest. Throughout Mubarak's rule, the Ministry of Interior held immense power and police violence had become one of the biggest problems in Egypt.

The government, however, began to claim that we were terrorists who were out to destroy the country, and they tried to use every propaganda tactic at their disposal to discredit us. They kept switching tactics. Sometimes they would reach out to us to negotiate, other times they would use violence to clear out the protests. All this time, Mubarak was trying to portray to the world that he was not a dictator and that he respected the will of the people. He dismissed the government (saying that he would replace it within a day), dissolved the parliament, and chose Ahmed Shafik—who was known to be less corrupt—to be the prime minister.* He even released Wael Ghonim, one of the most influential bloggers in Egypt, who had been arrested on January 27, as if to say that he respected human rights.

We spent the next few days meeting with various groups, trying to choose our leaders and determine our goals. Although everyone was united in their desire to overthrow the regime, there was a lot of internal strife among the different groups of protesters about the best course of action after. We were drawing up a list of names for the leader of the revolution, at the top of which was Mohamed ElBaradei. Nasserists vocally opposed him, claiming that he was an American spy responsible for the war in Iraq. They instead wanted Hamdeen Sabahi to be the leader. The Muslim Brotherhood opposed ElBaradei indirectly, suggesting that someone as secular would not be a good fit to lead the more conservative Egyptian population.

On February 2, the Battle of the Camel, as it became known, ensued. NDP leaders mobilized Mubarak supporters to attack the protesters. These were mainly people from the pyramid areas whose livelihood depended upon tourism and who thus viewed the revolution as a threat. They feared change and desired stability, preferring corruption and poverty over the risk of change. It was a stunt by the government to show that they too had a lot of supporters. Even though army units were

* He had been minister of civilian affiliation and had been good at managing resources.

stationed everywhere, the military stood aside as these people came on horses and camels wielding machetes and other weapons to attack the protesters. Absolute mayhem ensued. Everyone was screaming. Protesters ran from the camels which moved in a stampede while others tried to pull the riders off the camels and take away their weapons.

While we were being attacked, I went to the front lines to ask the attackers why they were trying to reverse the tide of revolution. Some of the attackers were much like the protesters in Tahrir, suffering under poverty and hardship, but they preferred stability under Mubarak. However, many of them had taken money and other benefits from the ruling party in exchange for using violence. My words were to no avail.

While this was happening, the state police attacked our headquarters in downtown Cairo. They arrested and tortured many people, including Mohamed Adel and Amr Ali. Arrested activists were taken to the intelligence headquarters, though they were released after a day or two. I still fail to understand the true purpose of the violence and arrests, but it was probably an attempt to scare the protest leaders.

The previous night, Mubarak had given an emotionally charged speech that convinced many protesters to return home. Rather than the hundreds of thousands that were there the night before, only around 30,000 people remained on Tahrir on February 2. The security forces expected that the attackers would succeed in dispersing the rest of the protesters and clear out the square.

However, the Battle of the Camel backfired for the government. We did not leave Tahrir Square despite these attacks. This made the authorities reevaluate their tactics. When Egyptians witnessed the violence and bloodshed perpetuated by the government, it irreversibly turned the tide against the Mubarak regime in the eyes of Egyptians. People were reminded of the inhumanity of those in power, and that led to even more people participating in protests and supporting those who were fighting for a better Egypt in Tahrir Square.

The intelligence officers close to Mubarak began to call for negotiations and suggested that once Mubarak completed his term, they would hold free elections. On February 5, Mubarak appointed as vice president former NDP official Omar Suleiman and charged him with negotiating with the

opposition in Tahrir Square. The revolutionary youth coalition refused to negotiate with the Mubarak regime. The Muslim Brotherhood and older politicians from the fake opposition parties were negotiating with Omar Suleiman and were offered his protection, but the youth coalition refused to talk to him until Mubarak resigned.

Mubarak tried to stay in power and avoid resignation. The military sought reconciliation and negotiated with the protesters to allow Mubarak to finish his term. Some people today speculate that if we had allowed him to stay and just waited for new elections, it would have allowed for reform. We refused, however, because we knew that Mubarak was capable of amending the constitution and never ceding power. We knew that all of his promises and speeches were false. He was just buying time to readjust his position and secure his grip on power.

On February 10, Wael Ghonim initiated a meeting with Prime Minister Ahmed Shafik. I did not trust Shafik, a loyal member of Mubarak's regime. Wael Ghonim, Mustafa Nagar, and I met with Ahmed Shafik, the new interior minister Mahmoud Wagdy, and other state security heads. Shafik offered us a deal wherein Mubarak and his son would not be candidates in the election after he finished his term and they would fire Mubarak's cabinet. The meeting was proof that our unarmed power now matched the seemingly almighty and fully armed regime, and it demonstrated the regime's gradual recognition that it could not rule when a sufficient number of people refused to obey it. However, the discussion also demonstrated to us that the regime was not yet ready to give in to our demands. We left the meeting, telling them clearly that we came to discuss the terms of Mubarak's resignation, and we demanded that he resign by the next day.

Meanwhile, Mubarak was giving emotional speeches on TV claiming that he finally understood the demands of the people and respected the protesters. It resembled the speeches given by Ben Ali, the dictator of Tunisia, when he was faced with the same wave of revolutionary protests. Mubarak's speeches were meant to quell the rage of the revolution. He promised that none of the protesters or leaders would be punished for their actions if we accepted the deal and that Egypt would be saved. We saw these assurances as a threat. He was implying that if he resigned, all hell would break loose and the country would burn. We also knew that

if we accepted his proposal, he would seek revenge and hang us all in the next six months. We, the revolutionary youth coalition, collectively rejected Mubarak's offer on February 10. This was the right decision to make with so much people power behind us.

On February 11, Mubarak resigned.

That morning, Omar Suleiman appeared live on TV to announce that Mubarak would resign in the early evening. I only saw this by chance when I was passing a store outside of Tahrir that had a TV on. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I stepped back, sat down on the pavement, looked up at the sky and cried. As I looked around I realized I wasn't alone. Many people were crying in the streets. And then we danced in the streets. We celebrated our first taste of freedom.

The Path of The Revolution After Mubarak

During the 18 days of revolution, over 900 demonstrators were murdered by security forces. They became our martyrs. Tens of thousands of protesters throughout Egypt had lost body parts such as eyes and limbs from the clashes with the police. The fight for freedom involves risks and costs. Yet, resistance can clearly make a difference. The resignation was such tangible proof that unarmed people can indeed bring about major political change against all odds if only they shed their fear, refuse to obey, and awaken their dormant power, which makes them more powerful than that of a tyrant.

And yet, even as Mubarak had resigned, much was still up in the air. At first, the Egyptian military took a fairly neutral stand and refrained from using violence against the protesters, seeing that the tide was in favor of those in Tahrir Square and people on the streets in cities and towns across Egypt. Powerful military officers in Egypt were also mistrustful of Gamal Mubarak and feared that he would take away their power. Gamal Mubarak was part of a new economic elite under Hosni Mubarak who had accumulated wealth through neoliberal policies that had privatized parts of the economy that were controlled by the military such as banks and were now controlled through a capitalist monopoly. He therefore posed a challenge to the traditional elite in Egypt, the military. Gamal Mubarak and his friends who now controlled the economy relied on the police, not the military, to repress any labor strikes or dissent. After Mubarak

resigned, the military was keen to remove Gamal Mubarak, and instead maintain their own privileged position. While Omar Suleiman was now heading the General Intelligence and supported Gamal Mubarak, more power was in the hands of the military council, Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). It was headed by Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi, who was the Defense Minister in Egypt under Mubarak.

After Mubarak's resignation we began to vacate the square; many of us needed sleep. Days upon days of running, facing tear gas, hiding, getting arrested, beaten, and tortured; we were tired. This is when the Salafis came to Tahrir Square in tens of thousands to support the Muslim Brotherhood. There are two types of Salafis in Egypt—more pragmatic Salafis and the jihadists. Those of us from a liberal background did not trust the pragmatic Salafis because they had always cut deals with the government. They emulated the model of Saudi Arabia, offering support to the regime in exchange for its non-interference in religious matters. The jihadist Salafis, on the other hand, wanted to overthrow the regime through violent methods and followed the preaching of radical jihadists such as Osama bin Laden. In terms of sheer numbers, the Salafis outweigh the Muslim Brotherhood. They are heavily funded by Saudi Arabia and have impeccable organization. Over the decades, they have garnered a huge base through charitable activities like providing food for the many poor people in Egypt. They believed that joining these protests at this moment would help them achieve an Islamic state, governed by sharia law.

When the Salafis came into the square, both radical and pragmatic, they tried to occupy it. This frightened us. The Muslim Brotherhood tried to mediate between the secular opposition and the Salafis. Dr. Mohammed El Beltagy, one of the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, tried to negotiate with us younger protesters. A kind, moderate man who could talk with anyone, he did not take an aggressive stand with us and always offered a workable solution. But he was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, so if the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood did not want to agree to a solution that sought to reconcile different views, Dr. El Beltagy would have to follow their orders.

We had experienced this earlier. Before the revolution the Muslim Brotherhood wouldn't join our protest and instead favored organizing

their own counter demonstrations. As we went around in circles with the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafis began to call for an Islamic state.

During and after the revolution, media attention exploded. We gave interviews to *Al Jazeera*, *CNN*, *BBC Arabic*, *BBC English*, and *France 24*. The ruling party had always monopolized the media, but after the revolution, we believed it was important to make our voices heard, both inside and outside Egypt. Scholars studying social movements and social media included the April 6 Movement in research papers, books, reports, and blog posts.

International attention had grown dramatically over the 18 days of the revolution. Everyone was watching Egypt. Some international reporters asked us why people were celebrating since the resignation of Mubarak was in essence a military coup. I was responding that our revolution was still strong and that we could protect our revolution from the military. We naively believed that the military would cede power merely because we brought down Mubarak. I told reporters we did not fear the military. However, I and many others were gravely mistaken.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Real Struggle Begins

After Mubarak's Resignation

Lost in the alleys of Mohandiseen and the streets of Bolak Al Dakrour are our lived memories of 2011. 18 days of the revolution were filled with stories—stories about protests, stories about torture, stories about demands, plans, and goals, stories about meetings and conferences to discuss our mobilization, resistance, unity, and resilience. On February 11, President Hosni Mubarak and Vice-President Omar Suleiman resigned. Our revolution had reached its zenith. We celebrated in Tahrir Square for many days. Hopes and dreams filled Egypt's streets. Our days were packed with meetings with the press, foreign delegates, youth coalitions, domestic political figures, and fellow resisters in Tahrir Square. My email inbox was flooded with people sending greetings and messages of solidarity with our movement. Those were the good days.

The day after Mubarak stepped down, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF)—composed of 23 senior military officers and headed by Field Marshal Tantawi—took over the formal reins of government and issued a statement that the military would hand over power to an elected civilian government. A spokesperson for SCAF publicly stated that Egypt would continue to abide by international treaties, suggesting that the 1979 Egypt–Israel peace treaty would not be challenged. The next day, SCAF suspended the constitution and dissolved Egypt's lower and upper houses of parliament (the People's Assembly and the Shura Council, respectively). A statement followed announcing that a commission would be set up to draft a new constitution that would be approved through a

referendum, and the military would remain in charge for six months or until new elections could be held.

In the days following Mubarak's downfall, we met every few hours with different members of the revolutionary coalition to discuss our future steps. We asked everyone to submit their demands and created a list to present to SCAF.

We demanded eight key concessions:

1. Lift the state of emergency
2. Arrest, investigate, and try former regime officials
3. Dissolve parliament and outlaw Mubarak's National Democratic Party
4. Hold free and fair parliamentary and presidential elections
5. Protect protesters and hold police accountable
6. Suspend the constitution and write a new one subject to public approval
7. Reform the security forces and limit executive power
8. Improve the economic conditions for the average Egyptian

Two days after Mubarak's resignation, some of us—including Wael Ghonim, Mahmoud Sami, and myself—received a call from the office of military intelligence to meet with SCAF later that day. We held a meeting for the members of the revolutionary youth coalition to decide if and who would attend the meeting. We argued that we should meet with the military and tell them of our demands in person. Revolutionary Socialists were against this meeting because of the history of military coups in Egypt and their belief that the military would ultimately destroy the revolution and democracy—as they had done throughout Egypt's modern history. After the discussion, about 70 percent of the members were in favor of meeting with SCAF. Two Revolutionary Socialists even joined our delegation to ensure that all persuasions in the youth coalition were represented. We were united in our demand for power to be handed to the people in a smooth transition toward democracy.

The elites in Egypt—including many businessmen—were collectively known as *foloul*, meaning the "remnant" Mubarak loyalists. Even if they

saw the need to get rid of Mubarak, they had certainly profited from his regime and were thus not interested in a real change. Following the revolution, some businessmen began investing millions of dollars into new media channels that supported SCAF and smeared the reputation of the revolutionaries. They were running headlines that April 6 members were going to the US to meet with CIA and Mossad agents. They claimed that "Maher, Asmaa, and Esraa traveled to receive orders from the US about holding demonstrations" and that we were involved in a plot to destroy Egypt.

Other benefactors of the Mubarak regime—including officials, bureaucrats, and media personalities—were opportunists and started to support the revolution after Mubarak resigned. We knew their real intentions were to put their own greedy interests above everyone and everything else. While SCAF was praising us for removing Hosni Mubarak, behind our backs they were attacking us. They were also relieved that our actions stopped Gamal Mubarak from ascending to take over the reins from his father, who had anointed him a few years earlier as his successor. SCAF had feared that Gamal would cut them out of his rule and that they would lose their control over Egypt's economy and politics.

SCAF was telling us that everything would be alright because we had succeeded in ridding Egypt of bad people. They also told us that continuing our protests would lead to Egypt's destruction. Since all that SCAF promised were vague words of change ("Everything will be okay now and Egypt has been saved") and not concrete actions, we continued to protest. We saw Field Marshal Tantawi, leader of SCAF, as a continuation of the Mubarak regime. He had been Mubarak's minister of defense and was not interested in changes that would strip him of power. We told them that we would not leave the square until there was a solid plan for fixing the constitution, the parliament, and the economy. We wanted to make sure that the ruling political party would not destroy the goals of the revolution. We needed a concrete resolution of our demands, not vague promises.

The Muslim Brotherhood, however, counting on the opportunity to finally gain a foothold into the formal governing structures, decided to enter long-term negotiations with SCAF. In a decision coming from their

top leadership, Muslim Brotherhood members left Tahrir Square. The rest of us stayed put because we were determined to change the entrenched political corruption in Egypt. We would not cut shady deals with SCAF for the sake of our own individual political ambitions or benefits. We wanted to focus on writing a new permanent constitution, changing laws, and altering the way the country is governed. As a result, SCAF favored dealing with the Muslim Brotherhood who were more inclined to cut a deal rather than with the revolutionary youth coalition forces.

On February 25, no sooner had the Muslim Brotherhood left when armed thugs attacked the square to clear out the remaining protesters. We called the thugs the "third party." They were paid by the authorities to carry out their dirty deeds, including beating up protesters and destroying the tent encampment. They used light weapons and wore civilian clothes. The military disassociated themselves from them by claiming they were not part of any state structures and were controlled by private individuals. However, we knew that these thugs had close associations with the police and the army because of their ease around the security forces and the impunity with which they attacked protesters while chanting in Mubarak's favor.

After we were driven out of the square and abandoned by the Muslim Brotherhood, some people trying to continue the sit-in were quickly dispersed. We did not want the voices of the revolution to be so easily silenced, and so we changed tactics and began organizing a protest in Tahrir Square every Friday. Millions of people came out to show their support for the revolution. Some officers in the military told us not to trust the military council. Meanwhile, SCAF did not offer any answers to any of our demands, either in writing or by changing their actions on the ground. So we continued to demonstrate.

In February 2011, the April 6 Movement stopped accepting new members until the old structure could be reorganized and rebuilt. We had around 500,000 members by then, and thousands of people wanted to join us. We needed a new vision. We faced a choice to either form a political party and stand for election or remain a social movement. We engaged in extensive discussions with both old and new members within the organization to determine which direction to take.

Eventually, we decided it was not the time to play politics and postponed forming a political party until after the state of emergency was lifted and a new constitution was written. We would continue as a social movement, a pressure group, and a watchdog organization. We would not run in the elections. Our role would be to support liberal candidates and continue to advocate for change from outside the parliamentary and institutional structures. Continuing our activism would allow us to exert the will of the people on the streets without cutting secret deals behind closed doors. People in Egypt did not trust political parties, as they were inclined to play dirty games.

Throughout February and March, SCAF held meetings with many political leaders. They were keen to cooperate with the old opposition parties such as El Wafd, the Nasserist parties, and El Tagamou, all of which had been an illusory opposition to Mubarak. These parties were a cheap parody of opposition. They always cut shady deals with the government for their own political benefits. They were not the voice of the people.

Before he resigned, Mubarak appointed General Ahmad Shafiq as prime minister. We pushed back against his appointment because he was part and parcel of Mubarak's corrupt government. At first, SCAF defended General Shafiq and wanted him to stay in power. On March 3, 2011, Shafiq agreed to an interview on a talk show where he was confronted by Alaa Al-Aswany, a famous Egyptian novelist and founder of Kefaya, who accused him of being a continuation of the Mubarak regime.* Unable to respond, Shafiq's incompetence was exposed to all Egyptians, and many people lost faith in him. That same day, the military council removed him from office.

On March 4, we saw tweets about a fire at the state security building in Alexandria and the attempts by the security and intelligence operatives to burn secret documents. Hundreds of protesters stormed into the headquarters, not knowing the troves of information they would uncover. My colleagues found secret files the police had kept on me. The police had followed me everywhere and knew everything about me. They knew what kind of cigarettes I smoked and who I called. They knew which brand of

* The interview came on the Egyptian ONTV satellite network on Reem Maged's talk show, *Baladna bel Masry*.

biscuits I bought from the store near my home. They knew when I took the train leaving Cairo and which hotel I stayed in.

Major demonstrations were held throughout March to strengthen the hand of the revolutionary forces in their negotiations with SCAF over who the next prime minister would be. SCAF wanted an old-timer—someone who had worked under Mubarak. We nominated ElBaradei, but SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood refused to support him. The military saw him as an outsider that could spell the end of their influence, while the Muslim Brotherhood rejected him because of his secular background. Finally, the revolutionaries, SCAF, and Muslim Brotherhood agreed on the choice of Professor Essam Sharaf to lead the government. He had been the Minister of Transportation under Mubarak but had resigned and joined the revolution from the first day of the protests. He was against Mubarak's policies and the regime. Unfortunately, he became the prime minister in name only. SCAF gave him no real powers.

Just as it was earlier, the head of state—this time, SCAF—held real control over Egyptian politics rather than the head of the government, Essam Sharaf. Through constitutional amendments, Sadat and Mubarak had given maximum authority to the executive branch in Egypt. SCAF held the same unchecked powers that the president did. Sharaf's cabinet was filled with ministers from the Mubarak era whom he could not replace without the support of SCAF. He was, in essence, the puppet of the military council.

Constitutional Referendum

After Mubarak's resignation, SCAF had suspended the constitution and created an eight-man constitutional committee to review certain articles. In March, SCAF, supported by the Muslim Brotherhood, proposed a referendum to amend the old constitution. The amendment would give SCAF presidential powers of legislation, allowing them to make laws. Many of us belonging to liberal revolutionary groups believed that a constitutional assembly should be established composed of many different representatives, including experts, authoritative figures, and members of the civil society, to draft a new constitution. We wanted to focus on writing a new constitution that would be the basis for all future laws rather than making

impromptu amendments to the old document, which would preserve the status quo.

Power had been concentrated in the executive office, and we sought a constitution that would distribute power among different political institutions, resulting in better governance, with more balanced political and judicial checks and fewer chances for a return to dictatorship. However, SCAF was playing political games to increase their own power and determine a constitution in their favor.

In the referendum, SCAF proposed to hold parliamentary elections before the presidential elections. SCAF knew that parliamentary elections would likely divide the opposition forces and cause them to battle one another for seats. It was clearly designed to sow internal discord among the opposition, and we saw this coming. SCAF had garnered the support of the old nominal opposition parties and was now joined by the Muslim Brotherhood, creating an insurmountable challenge for us. This was a tacit power-sharing agreement whereby SCAF would have the highest authority with presidential powers and the Muslim Brotherhood would be allowed to have a dominant representation in the parliament.

This new coalition began to campaign that a 'Yes' vote to amend the existing constitution would mean supporting stability, while a 'No' vote would mean supporting chaos. The Muslim Brotherhood added its support by campaigning that a 'Yes' vote would mean supporting Islam and that you were a follower of Allah, while a 'No' vote would mean going against Islam and that you were a follower of America and the West. The Muslim Brotherhood, together with Salafis, began spreading this propaganda in mosques. After the revolution, the Salafis had taken a firm stance against Mubarak. Even though they had always cut deals with the Mubarak regime, they knew that this was their chance to dominate the narrative of the revolution to sustain their large following.

The Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis believed that SCAF would grant them an Islamic state. Their goal was to gain a majority in the parliament that would finally give them a way to implement political changes, thereby establishing sharia law in Egypt. They had always talked about this while in the underground. They counted on the military to give them space to realize their political program in exchange for letting the military

control the presidential office, at least for a season. The Muslim Brotherhood stood against the demands of the revolutionaries to change the old constitution and dismantle the regime. They colluded with SCAF to realize their own political ambitions. The Muslim Brotherhood's use of religion to gain political leverage in the referendum bore ominous signs for the future.

On March 18, 2011, the amendment was approved with a 77 percent majority, and parliamentary elections were set to be held at the end of September. This fast-tracked election would clearly benefit the Muslim Brotherhood since it already had a strong organizational structure. They would face liberal groups that did not have enough time to form effective political organizations.

Soon after the referendum was held, the April 6 Movement withdrew from the revolutionary youth coalition that had been formed during the upheaval in Tahrir Square. Different parties to the coalition were divided on the most important issues and could not unite their members under one vision, especially after the referendum. At the same time, the Muslim Brotherhood continued using religion against us, claiming that the April 6 Movement, Revolutionary Socialists, and ElBaradei were atheists and that we were going against Allah.

SCAF was operating just as the Mubarak regime did. They did not believe in democracy, nor did they respect human rights. Two weeks earlier, on March 9, 2011, hundreds of nonviolent protesters were at a sit-in at Tahrir Square when they were arrested. One of these activists was Ramy Essam, a 23-year-old student and musician who had come to be known around the world as the "singer of the Egyptian revolution." Protesters were taken to the Egyptian National Museum and tortured with sticks, metal rods, wires, and whips. Amnesty International also released a report that 18 women detained during these protests were subjected to virginity tests by the military intelligence and threatened with prostitution charges. When exposed, these inhumane tactics further stoked the boiling anger of the Egyptian people toward the security forces and SCAF.

During the ongoing protests, young military officers often joined the demonstrations. In response, the military was constantly attacking Tahrir Square to arrest them. Once identified, they were accused of being

brainwashed traitors and were fired from the military. While members of SCAF and other high-ranking military officials had visited the square to reassure protesters that the army remained on the side of the Egyptian people, their actions suggested otherwise. When the thugs had earlier attacked the protesters, military generals showed up under the pretense of protecting them. But these were empty words. The military and the police stood by and watched to see who would come out stronger—the thugs or the revolutionaries.

A major clash between the security establishment and defecting officers occurred the following month. On Friday, April 8, 2011, thousands of protesters had gathered in Tahrir Square demanding the military prosecute Mubarak and his family for corruption. Officers in uniform without weapons joined the protesters, accusing SCAF of corruption, and set up a camp for the night with tents and provisions. They warned us not to trust SCAF and believed that they would betray their words and promises. In the early morning hours, the military police entered the square to remove the officers. Protesters surrounded the unarmed officers to protect them from being arrested. The raid turned violent when the military police used full force to extract the officers and break up the protest while protesters barricaded themselves behind the barbed wire. 71 people were injured—including the officers—and one person was killed.

I had left Tahrir Square early in the evening to return home and be with my wife. She was pregnant during the days of the revolution and now was in labor. Our son was born later that evening and we named him Nidal, which means "struggle."

Mubarak's Trial

One of the most prominent demands of the revolution had been to put an end to corruption. We were constantly debating whether it was better to try to transition institutionally, amending the existing system through electoral and constitutional reforms, or to destroy every existing institution, seeking vengeance against those who had been in power. Many people sought a kind of revolutionary justice that oftentimes had anarchical leanings; they wanted to destroy the elite, to overturn the system, and to treat politics as shameful. However, we also feared that if we forced

more far-reaching, radical changes such as imposing a different constitutional order, it would give SCAF an opportunity to exploit this turbulence and would provide it with a justification to take full control of the government. On the other hand, if we stuck with the old constitution and its rules, this would allow those in power to protect themselves, ensuring that the status quo would endure. The revolutionaries could not agree on a united path for transition, and this weakened our stance.

We ended up advocating for more radical measures during Mubarak's trial, such as securing international oversight or trying him at the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the Hague. SCAF did not agree and instead used the existing legal system to try him in the Egyptian court. This system was still unreformed and corrupt. After all, it was designed to protect Mubarak and his cronies, not to give Egyptians a fair trial over their long-time dictator with blood on his hands.

In May 2011, SCAF held trials for the former president and his officials. Mubarak and his interior minister Habib Al-Adly were charged with conspiracy to murder protesters. Mubarak's sons, Gamal and Alaa, were charged with corruption, embezzlement, and insider trading. Similar charges of corruption and fraud were levied against many ministers in his cabinet.

Mubarak recorded a speech with Al Arabiya TV a few days before his trial, saying that he and his family members had been wrongly accused of abusing their power. In response, the April 6 Movement released a statement that his speech resembled the speeches of Al-Qaeda leaders such as Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri in both effect and rhetoric, blaming the innocent Egyptians that dared to accuse him of crimes.[1] On May 8, 2011, our movement issued a statement to Egypt's foreign minister demanding to strip Nasser Kamel—Egypt's ambassador to France—of his title. The ambassador was saying to the French news media that former interior minister Al-Adly was not responsible for shooting innocent protesters on January 28. Kamel even closed the embassy to Egyptians who were protesting him. It became clear to us that those in power in Egypt still had an interest in protecting the old regime.

The April 6 Movement began to call for huge protests to take place on the last Friday of May, naming it the "Friday for Saving the Revolution"

and "The Second Day of Rage." Hundreds of thousands of people participated in these protests in various governorates of Egypt, and millions came out in Cairo. We demanded that Mubarak and figures from his regime face justice in fair, transparent, and public trials. We also demanded that governors be elected, the use of military tribunals for trying civilians be halted, and all political detainees released. We even agreed in public for the army and the ministry of interior to secure the streets in order to ensure there was no security vacuum and that clashes between thugs and protesters would be prevented.

During the trials of Mubarak and his confidants, most of the incriminating evidence was never presented in court. Mubarak was also wheeled in and out of court in a wheelchair to gain the sympathy of the public. Mostafa Abul Yosr, a prosecutor tasked with interrogating the former dictator, was in fact a Mubarak loyalist. SCAF made sure that every aspect of Mubarak's trial was a sham. They had full control over the court proceedings to steer them in the direction they wanted. Until the end of the trials, those that did go to prison lived in special luxury suite-style rooms in Tora prison, a block specially reserved for those from the former regime charged with corruption. Mubarak had settled into his beachside villa in Sharm El Sheikh after which he was "imprisoned" in a military hospital, and, finally, taken to the luxury rooms at Tora prison. None of the more serious charges against Mubarak and his cronies stuck because SCAF still had his back. SCAF's actions to prosecute Mubarak were a response to immense pressure from protests, and even then, they only offered empty promises and took meaningless steps to pacify our demands. Ultimately, the military council continued to protect the Mubarak regime as much as they could. SCAF members respected Mubarak because they considered him to be one of them—a military man who ascended to the presidency. Though they held no such favor for his sons.

The military was simply not interested in true democratic change. After all, their political influence depended on the existing power structure in Egypt. The military maintained a privileged status in Egyptian politics, society, and the economy, and wanted to change the system only to the extent that they would keep their perks and remain above civilian oversight. Under Mubarak, they had lost some of their influence as they were

getting eclipsed by a new economic elite that included Gamal Mubarak and his cronies. These were now the people that SCAF targeted, blamed, and persecuted after the revolution, including Ahmed Ezz, a steel magnate and former NDP leader who had threatened the political position of the military and enriched himself during Mubarak's privatization drive. Other than going after the economic elite, they did not want to change the system that had given them access to political and economic power.

SCAF members were the ones with a hold on power and authority. They also had the upper hand when it came to decisions surrounding the protester's demands, especially now that they were in cahoots with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis. The revolution was not represented by a united front and the military was ready to use this to its advantage. SCAF wanted to rebuild a system that would ultimately serve its own interests, while not being blamed for the corruption, poverty, inflation, and other grievances endured by Egyptians.

Revolutionaries Versus SCAF

Clashes persisted throughout the year. Whenever a protester was killed by the military, more people joined to demand justice for their death. In June, the riot police attacked the families of the martyrs of the revolution in Tahrir Square and the Balloon Theatre. In the five months since the start of the revolution, over 10,000 civilians—including protesters, activists, and at least one journalist—were put on military trial. Activists began calling for a massive rally on July 8 to "save the revolution." Before the rally was set to take place, a false report was published in *Youm7* ("Seventh Day") newspaper claiming that the April 6 Movement was planning to break into prisons and spread chaos on July 8. When the day came, thousands of protesters took to Tahrir Square to protest the impunity of those who committed atrocities against the people. We again called for the 1981 Emergency Law to be abrogated and for an end to trying civilians in military courts. The next day, Prime Minister Essam Sharaf gave a televised speech saying that he had ordered the interior minister to issue a decree terminating employment for 650 police officers accused of killing protesters. The former speaker of the parliament, Safwat Sharif, was also charged with organizing the violence in the Battle of the Camel.

This was hardly enough to calm down the atmosphere of protest. Immediately after his address, angry at the long-overdue justice, thousands of protesters came out on the streets, chanting against the government. Sit-ins throughout Egypt persisted while crowds chanted, "I can hear the mother of the martyr calling: I want my right and the rights of my children," and "farce, farce, farce, the gang is still ruling."

SCAF had created a Facebook page six days after Mubarak stepped down to "communicate with the Egyptian people." They issued their first communiqué on the page on February 17, dedicating it to the revolution and stating that the army wanted to build bridges with the Egyptian youth. A few months later, on July 23, on their Facebook page, SCAF issued a belligerent statement—Communique No. 69—against the April 6 Movement, claiming that we were driving a wedge between the armed forces and the people. They deemed us an enemy of the people and the state. They were parroting the same rumors that the Mubarak regime had spread earlier—that we were taking money from foreign organizations and that we wanted to destroy the country by inciting violence. They chose to attack the April 6 Movement because our support and influence grew even more after the revolution. They were very concerned about this. Whispers about our group's activities—including that our members had traveled to Serbia and the United States in 2009—were now conspiracy theories fueled by SCAF to question our motives.

As SCAF was using the full force of the media to smear our reputation, our activists were increasingly at risk. They were attacked on the streets by thugs supporting the military. When we organized a peaceful march to the ministry of defense in order to condemn and reject the accusations of the ruling military council, we were yet again attacked by seemingly unaffiliated, violent groups while the police, military police, and army watched.

Meanwhile, in July, the April 6 Movement was focused on continuing to mobilize people against the government. We distributed half a million leaflets across the country polling people on constitutional and government changes as well as their attitudes toward the military.

SCAF decided to move the parliamentary elections from September to November amid protests, clashes, and backlash. We had asked for a delay because the Muslim Brotherhood and the NDP remnants were

much better organized to campaign and win seats in an early and rushed election. In hindsight, even though liberals had another two months to organize, it was not enough to prepare. We had focused on street activities rather than on negotiating who would be the candidates to run in the elections. We did not have the experience to field candidates and protest at the same time. We had thought the parliament would be SCAF's puppet and not be able to do anything anyway. We decided we would ignore the election results. We believed that our power lay with the protesters on the streets and not the politicians.

The SCAF played the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamists, bringing them on board to hold elections quickly by tempting them with the easy victory they would gain. We had no time to think, and the revolutionaries did not have a plan. After the SCAF designed the process and the Islamists supported this plan, we only focused on trying to stop them or slow them down, always acting on the defensive. We were getting pushed into a corner. We believed at the time that protesting would delay or halt what they were doing. We wanted time to build new political parties and work on strengthening the constitution. In hindsight, I think it would have been better to also invest our time and energy in building support for liberal candidates for the parliament and help political groupings behind them in electoral campaigning.

October saw another wave of violent attacks against the protesters by the military, culminating in what would be called the Maspero Massacre. Coptic Christians in Egypt staged a sit-in after extremist Salafis pressured the Aswan governor to call for the demolition of their church in Upper Egypt. After the extremists had destroyed the church, the peaceful protesters staged their demonstration in front of the Maspero Television Building in Cairo. About 24 of them were killed by the army and police, who used automatic weapons and ran over protesters with military tanks. This was live-streamed and shown on *Al Jazeera* and *Al Jazeera English*, leaving millions of viewers around the world in horror. The military lied and blamed the massacre on the tensions between Muslims and Christians. Their justification for the use of excessive violence was that they were trying to prevent inflaming sectarian violence or a civil war. The Muslim Brotherhood took the military's side. To show solidarity with

those massacred, the April 6 Movement called for Egyptians to wear black, bring candles to the streets, and attend a silent demonstration in front of the residence of the public prosecutor in memory of the martyrs killed in Maspero. We wanted an Egypt where Coptic Christians and Muslims are equals and live peacefully together.

By November, the revolutionary forces grew extremely distrustful of SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood. There was also a group of Salafi followers of Hazem Abu Ismail who joined the revolutionaries. While their main goal was an Islamic state, they did not want to cut a deal with SCAF like other pragmatic Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood leaders. They were also different from the jihadis in that they were opposed to violence. Meanwhile, most Islamists began to call for Egypt to become an Islamic state.

In 1980, Anwar Sadat had added an article to the constitution stating that Egypt's official religion was Islam and that laws must be determined through sharia codes. He did this to gain the support of Islamists to counterbalance Nasserists and communists that he clashed with. Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood believed that this 1980 amendment was not enough to ensure the proper dispensation of Islamic law in the country. They wanted to add a new article calling for *Ahkam Sharia*. This would mean that every law would need to be determined through sharia. Such change would harm the religious protections for Christians, who would have to abide by Islamic rules of inheritance and other matters.

Before the parliamentary elections, Deputy Prime Minister Ali El Selmi met with 500 of Egypt's political figures, but many of the liberal politicians stormed out of the meeting in protest. After this meeting, El Selmi released a communiqué to the media about the previously announced formation of a 100-member Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution, stating that 80 of the proposed members would be chosen by the SCAF while only 20 would be drawn from a new parliament. This new parliament would be created through elections in November, as was determined in the March referendum. The communiqué also conveyed that SCAF would be more powerful than the president and the parliament. Essentially, this was a document of "supra-constitutional principles" that would shield the military from civilian oversight. This made clear to us

that the military had no interest in democracy. We deeply opposed this, and even the Islamists joined us in protests, which eventually forced the government to cancel the proposal.

2011 Parliamentary Elections and SCAF Escalation of Violence

Parliamentary elections were set to be held in late November 2011. The April 6 Movement did not run or publicly endorse any candidates in these elections because there was no clear roadmap to ensure that the elections would be run fairly. The former ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) was still unduly influencing how these elections were run with its money, control over state bureaucracy, media, and seating of its members in the government. They held a lot of political influence even after Mubarak's resignation since they were deeply entrenched in every governing institution in Egypt. Thugs who had assaulted an April 6 member earlier in May even claimed that they had been instructed by Ahmed Moftah, a former NDP member and MP, to attack protesters.

Nothing was real in the NPD's so-called support for democracy. Many of the candidates in the elections were part of the old regime now running under different political affiliations. The same tricks of intimidation and bribery were used to scare or buy people's votes. Many activists believed that to bring about a real change, one would first have to enter the entrenched political system and change it from within. However, most of the April 6 Movement believed that organizing outside the formal institutions was our only way to generate needed power and bring about that change.

Even though we decided not to run in the elections, we did support our friends Mohammed Hamzawi and Mustafa Najar, who believed in bringing about change through formal politics and went on to become members of Parliament. We largely maintained pressure on SCAF through protests, a strategy that at that time we viewed as being most effective to check and curtail powers of the military.

Many people did ask us to run in the elections. People who were supportive of the revolution tended to support the April 6 Movement. Yet, we were not politicians. That was not our skillset. We instead chose

to direct people to vote for other candidates who did represent the revolution. We led a campaign known as "White and Black Circle" to promote the candidates who were in line with the revolution. We made one list—the white circle—of people that we trusted. Our criteria were for candidates that were not corrupt and supported the principles of the revolution. We made another list—the black circle—of people who were known to be associated with the Mubarak regime and cooperating with security forces. Our campaign had some success, as several candidates that we supported won the elections and some that we opposed lost. However, looking back, beliefs and ideology, no matter how good or compelling, is not enough to win an election without a proper organization and strategy.

We also tried acting as election watchdogs. We were not an organization that had the experience or the funding for this kind of work. However, we had a lot of supporters. Somehow without foreign funding or money from any domestic NGO, our members created a report of electoral violations and gave it to SCAF and several NGOs.

In November, the families of protesters that had been killed or injured during the revolution organized a protest in Tahrir Square. Violent suppression of their sit-in by the security forces brought out huge anti-military protests into the streets. These protests saw one of the most violent clashes since the revolution began, marked by the battle on Mohammed Mahmoud Street leading from Tahrir Square to the Interior Ministry. It was a five-day-long standoff between the protesters and security forces. Images began to come out showing the police shooting at protesters and using teargas—attacks that left at least 41 dead and as many as 1,000 injured with gunshot wounds or teargas suffocation. People came out on the streets again and some of us saw this as "The True Second Revolution." The Muslim Brotherhood, however, released statements saying that these clashes were a conspiracy against them and the parliamentary elections.

The standoff was seen as a victory for the protesters, who held their ground despite the military's overwhelming force. There were snipers shooting at the eyes of the protesters. The tear gas they used was not the usual, as people started coughing up blood. These protests had gained the attention of the world. Clashes also exposed the brutality of SCAF,

which had so far positioned itself to be "a defender of the revolution." In response to the protests, SCAF announced May 23 and 24, 2012, as the dates for the presidential elections.

Parliamentary elections yielded an Islamist-dominated parliament. The multi-round elections that started in November concluded in February 2012, by which time the Muslim Brotherhood secured nearly half the seats of the first post-Mubarak parliament. On top of that, conservative Salafis had won another quarter of the seats. The remaining seats were won by liberal, independent, and secular politicians. The biggest failure on the side of the revolutionaries was the lack of a united platform, and many liberal and revolutionary candidates ended up running against each other.

Throughout the period of the staggered parliamentary elections, people were coming out on the streets to protest. The largest demonstrations since Mubarak had stepped down took place in December 2011. These protests, however, were brutally repressed by the police. The clashes began after the security forces violently dispersed a three-week sit-in outside the cabinet ministers' building, where we were demanding the military immediately hand over power to civilians. On December 20, thousands of women marched to "regain the honor of women." After the revolution, the participation of women and girls in the demonstrations had dramatically increased. The authorities wanted to terrorize the women and discourage their participation in street actions. Soldiers and thugs were harassing women during demonstrations, and videos of this became widespread. Their message was "If you come again, we will rape you." The women's march in December sent the message that they were not afraid of the threats and would continue to be on the streets. Women would not compromise their long legacy.

Over the next few days, members of the police were dragging women across the pavement, pulling down their headscarves. Tahrir Square was littered with motionless activists that had been kicked in the head until they could no longer get up. The army knew that the Muslim Brotherhood would not get involved in protests because at that time they were on a winning streak to capture the majority of the parliamentary seats and formally consolidate their power. Meanwhile, the military police used

every tool at their disposal, from electric prods and batons to stones and firebombs, to suppress the protests.

The military tried to play down the clashes, defended its soldiers, and accused the protesters of instigating violence. They also levied charges against 268 protesters, accusing them of attacking the cabinet ministers' building, security personnel, and the Scientific Institute in downtown Cairo. One of those charged, Ahmed Douma, had long been a supporter of April 6 and other secular activists going back to 2008. I heard about Douma before I met him. He came from a Muslim Brotherhood family and had in secret attended Kefaya protests. When the Muslim Brotherhood did not join the April 6 protests in 2008, he quit the Brotherhood. While Douma was never an official member of the April 6 Movement, he had coordinated the gathering and delivery of basic supplies from our families to us while we were in prison. We organized sit-ins for the release of all those arbitrarily detained by the police, but more of our members got arrested in the process.

While SCAF held a press conference to condemn protesters as thugs and defend the actions of its soldiers, the April 6 Movement concurrently held a news conference to hit back at the military and expose its lies. During our press conference, we played videos of army soldiers brutally assaulting unarmed protesters. We called it "*askar kazibuun*," which means "the lying military," to make sure that ordinary people did not believe the lies of the police and soldiers.

By then, the army had made its position clear. So had the Muslim Brotherhood. SCAF never intended to relinquish its reins of power and was determined to wield it with violence if needed. The Muslim Brotherhood was unwilling to defend the innocent protesters after their newfound political power. 2011 had started with hope, but it ended in betrayal.

CHAPTER SIX

Be Active, Not Reactive

After removing Mubarak from power, the only thing the military was interested in was a return to business as usual, meaning for the country to remain firmly in its unchecked control. SCAF told us to send them our recommendations on how to resolve the economic, social, and political crisis but to do so only after we called off the protests.

We urged the SCAF to form a civilian-led presidential council that would serve as the interim government, wielding key decision-making powers that were in the hands of SCAF. This council would include all presidential candidates, judge Zakaria Abdul-Aziz, and a military representative appointed by SCAF.

In March 2011, we proposed forming a constitutional assembly charged with drawing up a new constitution. Instead, SCAF pushed for quick constitutional amendments through a referendum. The Muslim Brotherhood did not back our efforts on constitutional reforms, because they knew they were poised to win expected parliamentary and presidential elections. They were comfortable with keeping the old constitution, gambling that their candidate that would win the presidential contest would be vested with unchecked presidential powers. They prioritized the short-term gain to secure immense powers over sustainable reform that would restructure the governing institutions and de-concentrate power in a more balanced way among them. Once they secured a parliamentary majority, they would dominate the constitutional assembly and do nothing to initiate serious and needed constitutional changes.

SCAF intransigence demonstrated our weakness. SCAF ignored our demands for transitional bodies to be formed. SCAF would hold discussions and negotiations with various civil society actors to "hear our opinions," but they would ultimately make the decisions that benefited them. Sometimes they made promises which they never kept, other times they simply rejected our proposals using excuses or conspiracy theories. Since the Muslim Brotherhood acquiesced to the decisions made by SCAF, believing that doing so would help them consolidate their own power, the voices of the revolutionaries were diminished. Even though the revolution defeated the dictator not long ago, we were not powerful enough at that moment–without the Muslim Brotherhood on board–to bring down SCAF.



Parody movie poster showing Tantawy and Mubarak depicted in the film Face/Off.

We did not get to design and control the transitional process. This gave SCAF the opportunity to stall any fundamental changes. Not wanting secular and liberal voices to enter a transitional council, the Muslim Brotherhood sided with SCAF to push the idea of the council after the elections, which they were already poised to win. The view of the Muslim Brotherhood after the revolution was extremely myopic. They perceived any efforts to coordinate with revolutionaries or build a broader coalition as detrimental to their drive to maximize their own political power. This better-off-alone mentality doomed the prospect for broad changes.

Our other proposal was to form a body under the Ministry of Justice tasked especially with receiving and acting upon complaints of corruption. The Muslim Brotherhood created a similar council after they came into

power, *diwan al-madalim* (*Board of Grievances*), but failed to implement it efficiently.

After Mubarak stepped down, we pressed SCAF about the fate of Mubarak's ministers and cronies who were still clinging to power. We were persistently ignored. We knew that the problems that Egyptians faced were not of one man's making, but that of an entire system that fed on the exploitation of the many for the benefit of the few—a system deeply entrenched in corruption, nepotism, cronyism, and ignorance. It was also a system rooted in unaccountable police who acted with impunity, which was one of the reasons we wanted to restructure the Ministry of Interior that the police answered to.

When we demanded the reforms of the Ministry of Interior, we did not ask necessarily for its ministers to be replaced. This would be limited to fighting the symptom, rather than the disease. We pushed initiatives advanced by human rights lawyers such as Khaled Ali that proposed wholesale restructuring of the ministry. The proposals would make the ministry transparent and accountable to the people. Our proposals were rejected outright and met with hostility from SCAF that viewed them as attempts to curtail, not reform, these institutions that served their interests.

When we gave Essam Sharaf, the interim prime minister appointed by the army after the revolution, a list of names to fill various ministerial positions, including recommendations to change different laws to facilitate the transition, he told us that he had no authority to do any of the things that we proposed. He was a figurehead, simply acting on the orders given to him by the SCAF.

The key proposals and recommendations that SCAF ignored included:

- Forming an independent committee to oversee Mubarak's trial
- Convicting police officers who have killed protesters
- Setting a minimum and maximum wage for all government jobs and unemployment benefits
- Ending military trials of civilians, and allowing retrials in civil courts for civilians tried in military courts in 2011
- A list of officials who should be fired from their government posts, which included the Public Prosecutor

- Ensuring freedom of the press, including ending arbitrary detention and questioning of journalists
- Reforming corrupt city councils

We revolutionaries met with the older leaders of Kefaya and Youth for Change, who suggested that they should meet with SCAF since they were better suited to handle the negotiations. We also reached out to Mohamed ElBaradei, who wanted no part in the dirty games played between SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood, but agreed to speak to SCAF on our behalf. However, SCAF dismissed all of our attempts to negotiate, seeing our revolutionary demands as a non-starter.

Spreading Our Revolution Stories Throughout the World

In 2011, I traveled the world, meeting with NGOs, governments, activists, and universities to talk about our revolution. I went to Spain, Italy, South Korea, Lebanon, Poland, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, and Qatar. These trips were revealing. While I shared my views on the evolving political situation in Egypt, I certainly learned a lot about struggles for rights and freedoms in other countries and their political transitions.

The most important trip was to the United States. In April 2011, I was invited to New York and Boston to attend conferences, make public speeches, and participate in meetings talking about the revolution. Prior to coming to New York, I had never traveled to America or spent any time in the West. Growing up in Egypt, I was only exposed to the Egyptian state propaganda that villainized the United States. The government always said that the US was trying to destroy the Middle East and that they were against Islam. I was always skeptical of Egyptian propaganda, but my only other perspective of the West came from American movies, some of which were stories of triumph and inspiration while others cast the Arabs and Muslims as the bad guys. When I got to New York, I was surprised. I saw Jews, Christians, and Muslims all in the same building—none of them were killing each other. I saw women wearing hijab alongside women in short skirts. There was no hostility between them. What was most delightful to experience was the genuine support that people expressed everywhere for our revolution. Walking down the New York streets while

heading to various meetings, I would see cart vendors who had put up signs of support for the Egyptian revolution.

I met with representatives from the major news outlets while in New York City. International journalists who had been in Egypt played a crucial role in ensuring that the world watched in awe as our revolution unfolded. The editorial boards were influential in shaping public opinion and policy in America. I believe that democracy and social justice are deterrents to terrorism and violent radicalization. Most of the West's policy towards the Middle East is based on fighting terrorism, so I spoke at every opportunity on this subject. Bobby Ghosh (*Time Magazine*) and Fareed Zakaria (*CNN*) both greeted me as if I had just led a small-town football team to win the World Cup. When people would tell me that they were surprised by our revolution and by seeing the seemingly powerful Mubarak step down, a voice inside my head would always respond, *me too*.

While at the reception desk of *The Washington Post*, a man walked up to me dressed in the most extraordinary outfit I had ever seen—he was very tall and wore the most colorful hat, jacket, pants, and shoes. As we introduced ourselves, he said with the biggest smile, *Hi, I'm Bootsy Collins*. Michelle McElroy, one of the people who had arranged many of my meetings, would become a great friend and advocate. She was clearly a fan of Collins, telling me of "funk" music and how Bootsy used protest lyrics in pop music. We talked about police violence in the African American community (which was something that we in Egypt were aware of) as we rode up the elevator. I expressed my desire to meet with people who had been victims of police violence in America, and their advocates, to discuss ways we could support each other.

I also had the honor to spend time with Professor Noam Chomsky at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) during this trip. I knew that he supported the Arab Spring and had spoken on behalf of April 6 in the media. What I did not know was that Professor Chomsky gave exceptionally good advice. He told us not to trust SCAF and not to trust the American government either. He talked about US weapons sales and military contracts that overrode public policy and laws. He explained that the US would support democracy only if it was directly in their interest to do so and that they did not shy away from befriending and supporting dictators.

While walking across the MIT campus to speak at a panel at the Center for International Studies Starr Forum, I was surprised to see an old friend, Aly El Tayeb, who I had met in Cairo at Youth for Change events in 2005 where he had always protected us from police attacks during demonstrations (he was a tall and imposing figure). He had left Egypt to study before the revolution. When he saw me, he picked me up and swung me around the courtyard as if I was just a little kid! I needed a good translator to articulate my points for the MIT panel and Aly was the perfect answer to my quandary as he knew all the political parties and events leading up to January 25. After the panel, I was welcomed by the Egyptian community with a festive meal and a lot of discussion of past and future politics.

I was very eager to meet with activists in the United States. There were activists from the US Uncut direct action group who were for higher corporate taxes and against cuts in public spending that would negatively impact education, health, and welfare services. They had reached out to me before my trip because they wanted to learn about our resistance strategies. In New York one evening, they organized a session for me to talk about the April 6 Movement. They themselves wanted greater justice and democracy within the American system, and I realized that night that my hosts were a lot like us Egyptians. We discussed how we could build a network of activists around the world and that we had to be part of a larger, global community of activists and organizers for change. Uncut would soon become part of the US Occupy movement.

In September, I was invited to Poland by the Lech Walesa Institute and met with the former president, Lech Walesa, who was at the helm of the Solidarity movement in the 1980s. I had long considered it very important to learn from the experience of others, including the Polish Solidarity, and contextualize that knowledge to our own circumstances while we searched for an optimal organizational form and strategy. Now it was my chance to share my experiences with those from whom I had learned, and engage with some of the people who had a role in the nonviolent revolutions in Eastern Europe, including from the Czech Republic, Poland, and Serbia.

The same month, the April 6 Movement was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. To us, it was an exceptional honor and it gave us a sense of validation for our years of effort and sacrifice. However, many people

in Egypt viewed this nomination with suspicion and even contempt. Conservative Islamists believed that the Nobel Prize was given to those who were against Islam, and they used it to spread their falsehoods about our movement. In their propaganda campaign we were Western, secular, and atheistic agents similar to the past Egyptian Nobel laureates such as Anwar Sadat, who made peace with Israel, and Naguib Mahfouz, who wrote a novel that they felt denigrated Allah. Both of them got a Nobel Prize because they were against Islam, they claimed. SCAF also promoted the narrative that the Nobel Prize was a political tool of the US to reward those who were loyal to the West. They used the example of ElBaradei, another Egyptian Nobel laureate, who they falsely accused of helping the US invade and occupy Iraq. They claimed that April 6 was nominated for the same prize precisely because we were an agent of the US.

I returned to the United States in October. During the first trip, most of my discussions, speeches, and meetings concerned the role of social media and the revolution in Egypt. On this second trip my focus had shifted. I was now openly critical of SCAF. I was saying that SCAF was interested in maintaining its own control over the country and was the main threat to the democratic aspirations and hopes that many of us revolutionaries fought for.

Professor Jim Zogby (Arab American Institute) hosted a discussion in Washington, DC on the status of Egypt's youth revolution. It was only then, while speaking with a journalist at this event, that I learned that the US State Department was unaware that SCAF was targeting us on its Facebook page. I talked about the role of April 6 in the upcoming parliamentary elections, which we had strategized in three phases. The first phase would include educating the masses about candidates and making sure the electorate could make informed choices. The second phase, during the elections, would be to monitor the electoral process in collaboration with other NGOs. And the final phase, following elections, would be to turn April 6 into a watchdog organization to keep pressure on SCAF and the elected parliament.

We had learned so much about nonviolent struggle and perseverance from the strategic successes of the American Civil Rights Movement, yet police violence still claimed many African American lives in the United

States. I wanted to speak with activists and community leaders about this systemic problem in America that might offer lessons for Egyptians. A meeting was arranged with Michael Skolnick, an activist, and Shaka Griffith, who covered political affairs for *Global Grind*. During our conversation, we made many comparisons to youth in the black community who were being killed by police and the young martyrs of the revolution in Egypt. We also found we had a common strategy in providing immediate support to families of martyrs and victims of violence.

In my travels, I always sought out the Egyptian diaspora. From Albany, New York, to Anaheim, California, meeting Egyptians in the US and discussing Egyptian politics, and speaking Arabic gave me a sense of being at home. I discovered that the Egyptian community in the US grappled with the same issues as the Egyptians in the country. They categorized people as Nasserists and Muslim Brotherhood—still divided by old ideological factions—and even while living in the West, Egyptian women were still under pressure to wear a hijab. After the revolution, Egyptians abroad were able to speak more openly and with pride about being Egyptian, as they too felt that the revolution changed the perception of Egyptians as civilized, rights-seeking people.

At the time I was visiting the US, the Occupy Wall Street movement had set up an encampment in Zuccotti Park in New York and was spreading across the United States. The climax of international solidarity between what was happening in the US and what took place in Egypt came when Asmaa Mahfouz and I signed the Egyptian flag in Zuccotti Park with the slogan "Down with the Regime," and the Egyptian flag flew with the American flag in joint protest. On October 24, Asmaa and I led thousands of protesters from Zuccotti Park through New York City chanting the slogans of our revolution, "*al-shaab yurid isqat al-nizam*" ("the people want to topple the regime"). The next day, Occupy protesters in Oakland were tear-gassed with the same gas that had been used against Egyptian protesters, with "Made in the USA" stamped across the canisters. The violent crackdown happening in Oakland began to resemble the same battles we experienced in Egypt.

On October 27, Bassem Fathy and I appeared on *Democracy Now!* expressing solidarity with American protesters and condemning the

violence in both the US and Egypt. The next day, we organized a protest in Egypt on behalf of Americans who had been tear-gassed in Oakland, marching from Tahrir Square to the US Embassy. Hundreds of people showed up on the streets of Egypt, standing in solidarity with American protesters. It was the first time that I know of anyone in Egypt who organized protests in support of ordinary Americans fighting for their rights at home.

In November 2011, on my return from South Korea, I came back to the United States a third time to attend Harvard University's Arab Weekend. I was a keynote speaker, and the theme was "The New Generation of Arab Activists: Four Pathways to Change." This stop at Harvard felt like an important moment in international recognition of the Egyptian revolution and being seen as a force for change across the Arab world and beyond. Egyptian students from across America attended the conference. Speakers brought attention to and raised awareness of the military trials of civilians in Egypt. At that point, there had been over 1,000 military trials since the beginning of the revolution, where ordinary Egyptians—including the blogger and journalist Alaa Abd El-Fattah—were prosecuted and sentenced.

While back in the United States, I flew to Los Angeles to speak on a panel and got invited by actor Robert Patrick to visit a film set where the film *Gangster Squad,* set in the 1940s, was being made. From a tactical point of view, filmmaking is quite impressive. Base camp, secured perimeter, controlled access to the set. I was picking up ideas for campaign strategies everywhere I looked. I was greeted very kindly by everyone while Robert introduced me around: "This is my friend Ahmed Maher who co-founded the April 6 Movement that was at the forefront of Egypt's Revolution!" I was told there would be gunfire on the set and was offered earplugs, which I declined. Everyone got the joke and laughed. I eventually regretted not getting the earplugs because gunshots in a building are much louder than in the open air. The film starred Sean Penn, who had been to Tahrir Square around the end of September 2011. Although we didn't meet in Cairo when he visited the city, he shook my hand on the set and showed me the camera set up and how they were filming. I was fascinated to see the hard work that goes into such a short film production.

As we were in a van going back to the parking lot, the driver stopped to pick up someone walking down the street dressed in a 1940's gangster costume. Robert Patrick introduced him to me, saying, "Holt McCallany, this is my friend Ahmed Maher, the co-founder of the April 6 Movement in Egypt who was at the forefront of Egypt's revolution!" Holt turned to me and asked if he could ask a question. "Of course," I said, thinking that the actor might ask me about how we used Facebook—a question I heard about a hundred times that week. But then, to my surprise, he asked me about what revolutionaries in Egypt would do for Palestine, and where our revolution fitted into the new Middle East that he thought we were fighting for. I immediately said, "In my life, no one has ever asked me this question!" Everyone burst into laughter. Holt expressed his desire to visit Cairo; I offered to show him Egypt if he were to come to visit. This night was the beginning of a great friendship and was filled with laughter I would never forget.

I returned to New York to speak at the International Peace Institute about the upcoming parliamentary elections. As Occupy protests around the US were being summarily shut down, I spoke to thousands of Occupy protesters on the steps of Washington Square Park in solidarity with them and in support of our generation's ability and desire to make global change. I told the crowds about the protest we had planned with millions of Egyptians the following day calling for social justice.

When I arrived back in Cairo on November 19, I went straight to Tahrir Square. Protesters from both secular and Islamist groups gathered in the tens of thousands for the "Friday of One Demand." Together, we called on Egypt's new military rulers to honor their promises to relinquish their power after the fall of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011. Riot police and military units descended on the square, breaking up encampments, making arrests, brutally beating some protesters, and firing tear gas and rubber bullets into the crowd. Egyptian doctors claimed that live ammunition had been found in several bodies. According to the Ministry of Health, the toll from that day included at least 1,500 injured and a minimum of 23 dead. The renewed clashes came just one week before the scheduled parliamentary elections.

At the end of November, I traveled to the Netherlands to receive the

Democracy Ribbons Award. In my acceptance speech, I bluntly stated, "The army has hijacked the revolution." This was a reality that had become apparent to me and my comrades over the months. In response, the government used my travels to portray me as an agent of the United States. They spread falsehoods that I was taking money from the US government, that the revolution was commissioned by the US and Israel. Any links with the United States are suspicious in the Arab world, as many people remain critical of the US role in the region. But this propaganda against me missed the point that the United States and Israel considered Mubarak a friend until the very day he stepped down.

On returning from my travels, I tried to explain to the Egyptian media my position and goals behind my travels and meetings in the West. I also tried to keep my travels as short as possible to stay rooted in Egypt. I knew the importance of garnering international support but also how important it was to remain focused on our goals in Egypt. I tried not to be outside Egypt for more than 3 days at a time. Unfortunately, because of the organized propaganda against and targeting of April 6 as foreign agents and spies, a number of the followers left ours ranks. At the same time, many people knew that SCAF was lying, and we were able to draw some new supporters to our movement. People organized marches against SCAF, titled, "We are all April 6 Movement" to rally against SCAF's lies and in solidarity with our movement.

I do believe it was important to tell the world about our story and not let it be forgotten. International support and awareness placed added pressure on those in power in Egypt to follow through on their promises. After the revolution, the world attention was focused on Egypt and at least in 2011, SCAF seemed to care about how they were perceived by the world. We needed to use this opportunity to make sure our voices were heard and to maintain both domestic and international pressure on the regime.

CHAPTER SEVEN

2012: Revolutionaries Divided

No Unity in Diversity

The final round of parliamentary elections concluded in early January 2012. The Muslim Brotherhood had promised that they would not seek a majority in the parliament and would allow other political parties an opportunity to participate in government. They broke this promise and went on to form the majority with the Salafis. Muslim Brotherhood's political party 'Freedom and Justice' won 47% of the seats in the People's Assembly, the lower house of parliament. The Salafis won another 24% of the seats, putting the power squarely in the hands of the Islamists. Islamist parties also won over 90% of the contested seats in the Shura council, the upper house of parliament.

It was very difficult to change the existing system, even after Mubarak had stepped down. The role of religion in politics became the most sensitive issue in determining what Egypt would look like after the revolution. The liberal revolutionaries wanted a secular, democratic state while Islamists wanted an Islamic state.

The Islamists were also divided as different Islamist groups had different visions of an Islamic state. The Muslim Brotherhood wanted a state that resembled Iran. Iranian media had even supported and praised the Muslim Brotherhood during the revolution. Some Jihadists, on the other hand, wanted an Islamic state based on the ideologies of Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. There were some groups even trying to make Egypt a theocracy like Saudi Arabia.

Huge protests were held in Tahrir Square on January 25, the first

anniversary of the revolution. On that day, the Muslim Brotherhood came out to join the protests because the main focus of these protests was calling for an end to military rule and handing power over to the elected parliament immediately.

In January 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis were favoring the SCAF in their every decision and decree. This caused an even wider rift, leading to clashes between the revolutionaries and the Muslim Brotherhood inside Tahrir Square. Revolutionaries were chanting against the Muslim Brotherhood, calling them traitors for having cut deals with the government and betraying the goals of the revolution. Thousands of Muslim Brotherhood protesters were also chanting against the revolutionaries. They chanted "the army and the people are one hand" instead of the revolutionary chanting against the SCAF. Some groups chanted "Islamia Islamia" and "Egypt is Islamia" meaning the system in Egypt must be Islamic state, not secular.

I was deeply disheartened to see this violence break out, and I wanted to call an end to the violence by directly addressing the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood from their stage. The area guarded by the Muslim Brotherhood in the square was very well organized and I had to get permission from many officials of the Muslim Brotherhood before I was allowed onstage. I addressed hundreds of thousands of people from that stage, appealing to both sides to end the violence and divisions. I tried to explain that the young liberals and members of the Muslim Brotherhood were both components of the revolution, fighting against a common enemy: Mubarak's regime and the military.

Some people began to chant against me, saying I was supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and betraying the revolution. Many people who followed me wanted me to take a stronger response against the Muslim Brotherhood but I remained steadfast in my belief that unity had to be established and maintained. I suggested that those in the square needed to remain united even if we had different points of views. Fighting would only prove dangerous to the revolution.

It was the army that had put itself above the constitution. The army had humiliated thousands of women by subjecting them to virginity tests. They were the ones who jailed, tortured, and killed thousands of

protesters. The army was still unwilling to relinquish its power and continued the economic policies of the Mubarak regime which had left millions of Egyptians in poverty and despair. The army were the ones who needed to first step down from power for democracy to stand a chance.

The police did not stop its violent tactics against protesters. Four of our members, Sherif Mohamed, Mahmoud Zakariya, Mahmoud Hossam and Hassan Hafez, were beaten and humiliated by police officers after being detained for hanging posters in early January. The government had supposedly dissolved the State Security Investigations Services and replaced it with the National Security Agency in 2011. However, this new agency was working exactly as the old, violating basic human rights by arbitrarily detaining, arresting, and torturing activists.

On February 2, another massacre was carried out against the revolutionaries. There was a football match held in a stadium in Port Said between El-Ahly and El-Masry football clubs. After the match, 74 people died in clashes between the Port Said Ultras supported by the police and El-Ahly Ultras. This was broadly seen as revenge by SCAF against El-Ahly Ultras who had opposed the regime. The Ultras had been an important part of the revolution in 2011, standing guard against anyone attacking the protesters.

We knew that this was not some spontaneous clash but a planned counterrevolutionary move. We speculated that the military was in favor of this unrest so that they could use this as a pretext to increase their power in the name of security and maintaining public order.

On February 4th, thousands of people reacted to these killings and huge protests were held at the Ministry of Interior building in Cairo. Some of the protesters were so angry that they wanted to burn the Ministry of Interior building. I went to the Parliament building to meet with members to stop the violence. Members of Parliament called the Minister of Interior to stop shooting the protesters. I then went to talk to the protesters who demanded an investigation for what transpired in Port Said.

As I was talking to the protesters, I blacked out. The next thing I remember is waking up in the hospital. I was told that someone threw a heavy piece of wood on my head from the top of a building. I spent a week in a coma at the hospital, and this injury led to permanent stability and

movement issues. I spent the next few weeks in and out of consciousness but I never found out who was behind the attack.

In April 2012, we organized the fifth anniversary of the April 6 Movement. The Minister of Youth and Sports supported our event and gave us a large theater in the Ministry of Sports to hold our event. Thousands of people, including most of the leaders of political parties and presidential candidates attended the event. Politicians usually came out to attend our events because we were able to attract thousands of people to come out.

SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood initially had a good "working" relationship. They had won the majority in the parliament and had appointed a former general to chair the Defense and National Security Committee. They also used their parliamentary majority to investigate Ziad El-Eleimy, a secularist parliamentarian for allegedly insulting SCAF Chair, Field Marshal Tantawi. But by mid-2012, the Muslim Brotherhood began to criticize SCAF. The emboldened Muslim Brotherhood-led parliament demanded the dismissal of the SCAF appointed officials for lifting the travel bans on the American NGO workers. SCAF's response to the challenging of its executive powers, (including power to appoint the government) was quickly felt as rumors spread that SCAF may challenge the parliament's constitutional legitimacy. The MB accused SCAF of "aborting the revolution" and SCAF reminded them of Nasser's crackdown on the group.

The MB's nomination of Khairat el-Shater for president further escalated this conflict, since it openly contested the SCAF's executive power. In a statement announcing the decision, the Brotherhood accused the council of disrupting the parliament's work, pressuring parties to leave the Constituent Assembly, and attempting to run a presidential candidate who would resurrect autocracy.

Presidential Elections: Campaigning and First Round

With Presidential elections approaching, we stood behind the stance taken by ElBaradei which was that it was too soon to hold Presidential elections because there was no constitution, no set rules to ensure a fair election, and all authority still lay with SCAF.

In April, Omar Suleiman announced that he would also run for

elections. There was immediate backlash and we immediately began to demonstrate against his candidacy. Around the same time, the Electoral Committee disqualified 10 out of the 23 candidates running in the presidential elections. Suleiman did not qualify because he had failed to gather enough names in his provincial petitions.

The Muslim Brotherhood had promised not to run candidates for president after they gained a majority in the Parliament so that they would not dominate all branches of government. However, as per usual, they reneged on this promise (not a surprise to any of us). They put forth the name of Khairat el-Shater, a Muslim Brotherhood activist. He had been arrested for violent actions against the state in 2007, and his criminal record disqualified him from running in the elections.

The Muslim Brotherhood then selected Dr. Mohammed Morsi who was a professor and engineer. My first instinct was that this was a bad decision. Egypt has a lot of Coptic Christians and liberal, secular people who feared the Muslim Brotherhood and their Islamist vision for the country. These fears stemmed from seeing the Islamic government in Iran, which was dominated by one man and was extremely strict and intolerant of religious pluralism and freedom. Also, Morsi was known as the 'spare tire' who stepped in only when Khairat el-Shater could not stand for elections.

The components of the revolution were divided between three candidates, Khaled Ali, Hamdeen Sabahi, and Aboul Fotouh who all ran on the platform of representing the revolution. Nasserists supported Sabahi while most socialists supported Khaled Ali. The Muslim Brotherhood threw all their support behind Mohammed Morsi. We believed that running in the elections would be a huge mistake, so we did not campaign in support of any of the candidates.

Instead, we concentrated all our efforts against Amr Moussa because he was backed by corrupt businessmen, police, and politicians from Mubarak's era. We could not let him win the election, and started campaigning heavily against him. We held demonstrations outside his campaign rallies and spread flyers about why not to elect Moussa. We wrote the slogan "No to remnants" on walls and sidewalks outside his rally.

Some people supported Amr Moussa only because they saw no other

viable choices. Aboul Fotouh was a liberal Islamist, and they did not trust Fotouh's Islamist background. However, from my point of view, at least Aboul Fotouh was part of the revolution. His party, Masr Qawaaya (Strong Egypt), had many members who supported the revolution. The popularity of both candidates fell after they got into a live public debate in which they used crude language to criticize and blame the other. This in turn raised the popularity of Mohammed Morsi and Ahmed Shafik.

The first round of the Presidential elections took place on May 23, 2012. We were working to supervise the election results through our Oyoun Masr (Egypt's Eyes) campaign. We covered many polling stations to ensure that results were not tampered with. We were reporting on the voter turnout and electoral violations taking place. The supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, Ahmed Shafik, and Amr Moussa violated numerous electoral rules across various governorates in Egypt. These violations included engaging in propaganda outside polling stations, using buses to transport voters, and distributing cash and food outside polling stations. Ahmed Shafik had the highest percentage of violations (48%), followed by Mohammed Morsi (30%).

When the results came in, it became clear that Mohammed Morsi and Ahmed Shafik were on top. Until this point, all the focus had been on Amr Moussa and Aboul Fotouh. They were the candidates that were being compared in the media and taking part in all the major debates. When the election results came in, the fact that the second runoff would be between Mohammed Morsi and Ahmed Shafik took us by surprise. We had seen that most of the political elite from Mubarak's time were supporting Amr Moussa, and so we thought that Ahmed Shafik was not all that popular. Thus, we did not spend any time campaigning against Shafik.

Presidential Elections: Runoff

To choose between Shafik and Morsi was disheartening. Ahmed Shafik was a man who represented the previous regime. He had been the minister of civil aviation under Mubarak, and the prime minister during the revolution. We did not trust Morsi. He was from the Muslim Brotherhood which had broken many promises and even at times used violence against their opponents.

When the second round of elections approached, we needed guarantees from the Muslim Brotherhood. We would leverage our support for Morsi in exchange for certain promises from the Muslim Brotherhood. The April 6 Movement had been one of the main groups of the revolution and held a lot of credibility among Egyptians. If we campaigned for Morsi, it would give him a huge boost in the elections.

We began to frequently meet with leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood. We needed them to promise that they would ensure freedom of speech and respect human rights and religious freedoms. They promised us that the Muslim Brotherhood would not try to monopolize the government; they would choose a vice president from a different party and form an inclusive cabinet. They also stated that they would respect all international agreements and treaties and represent all Egyptians, not just the Muslim Brotherhood.

I asked to meet Khairat el-Shater, the most powerful member within the Muslim Brotherhood. In our meeting, he told me that the Muslim Brotherhood only allied with the SCAF because they wanted to bring change from within. I agreed with him when he said that the economy needs to be liberated from under the control of the military. He admitted that the Muslim Brotherhood made many mistakes, and that they wanted to turn over a new leaf. He gave me promises that they will respect human rights and secular freedoms. However, he did not commit to anything concrete and claimed that the Muslim Brotherhood ran for elections because there are no other strong parties to challenge the old regime. The Muslim Brotherhood promised dreams, but were never specific about how they would be fulfilled.

We organized a meeting of all the coalition forces at the Fairmont Hotel with Mohammed Morsi to discuss our concerns. He gave us the same promises of how he would respect human rights and international treaties, and adhere to changes to the constitutional assembly. Many people asked us how we could trust the Muslim Brotherhood given their history, but we told them that we do not have a choice. It's either Morsi or Shafik.

We held a referendum within the April 6 Movement to determine whether or not we would support Morsi. Each neighborhood had a group and a team leader, and each group held this referendum, both online and

offline. About 70% of the members were in favor of supporting Morsi. In our final public meeting before the elections, we declared our support for Morsi with the caveat that we would give Morsi 100 days to keep his word or we would take to the streets against his policies.

As soon as we expressed our willingness to support Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood changed its entire approach to us. They sent positive messages throughout their grassroot networks and in the media that we (April 6 and its members) are patriotic and good people. When the Muslim Brotherhood was allied with the SCAF in the second half of 2011 and the first half of 2012, they had repeated false rumors and conspiracies about the April 6 Movement being funded by Israel and the West. This made clear to us the strict top-down hierarchical structure within their organization. The leaders of Muslim Brotherhood would give commands and determine the position of the organization without actual discussion with its broader members, a fairly fascistic leadership approach. The leadership could make the whole organization turn against us one day, and be for us the next. They knew that they needed our support now because many liberals and Copts were afraid of the Muslim Brotherhood and would be skeptical of voting for them.

Some people from the revolutionary coalition wanted to boycott the elections. I did not understand this position because these people had already voted in the first round. After we decided to support Morsi, some people left the April 6 Movement. It was the first time Egypt was having free elections. It was a strange time in Egyptian political life.

The Muslim Brotherhood implemented a brilliant strategy to safeguard the integrity of the election results. On election night, they stationed observers at every polling station who photographed and documented the total vote counts. By doing so, they ensured that the results couldn't be altered later. They even live tweeted each count and compiled the results nationally to prevent central fraud when the overall votes were tallied. Since the electoral commission takes a week to certify the results, this thorough documentation made it difficult for SCAF to manipulate the final numbers.

Morsi won the presidential elections with about 52% of the vote.

Morsi Rises to the Presidency: Intolerance and Politicking

On June 30, 2012, Morsi was sworn in as president. He is the first civilian leader in Egypt and the first Islamist to be elected as head of state. He promised to be a president to all Egyptians and yanked open his suit jacket to show that he was not wearing body armor, underscoring the point that he is not afraid.

The Muslim Brotherhood was in a powerful position. They controlled both houses of parliament and would form the constitutional assembly. They also now controlled the executive. The struggle was now between the Muslim Brotherhood, the new powerful player, and the military, the old political elite.

We continued to meet with leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood to give them names for the vice president and other cabinet positions. However, they ignored us. They either chose members of the Muslim Brotherhood or other people with an Islamic background. The new government included 29 technocrats (seven from Mubarak's time), four ministers from the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, one minister from the moderate Islamist Al-Wasat Party, and one from the Salafist Al-Nahda Party.

The Muslim Brotherhood was not open to any criticism against them and were repeating the same speeches about waiting and giving them a chance. The Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis began to call for Islam to be the religion of the state and implementing sharia law (Islamic law). They wanted to add articles in the constitution to overturn international treaties that do not comply with Islamic Law. This would lead to many laws being amended including the laws governing a woman's right to divorce.[1] They wanted to make stricter laws around homosexuality and other such freedoms of expression. The Salafis also wanted to remove legal age limits for marriage because they said that there was no age limit on marriage in Islam, and even nine- or ten-year-old girls should be able to get married.

We opposed these regressive laws and changes that the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis were trying to usher in. In response, they began to parrot the same rumors of how civil society in Egypt is taking money from the West to destroy Arabic tradition and Islam. They used this conspiracy

against Islam to garner support, even within the constitutional assembly. As they did before, they began to use religion in every single argument, calling anyone who opposed them *kufar* (non-believers).

In July and August, we focused our energy on pushing for the release of detained activists. It was the month of Ramadan, the holy month in which Muslims fast. We organized an iftar (dinner that breaks the fast) in front of Tora prison in support of those detained. We held nationwide protests to be held in August to push Morsi to end military trials for civilians and issue a general amnesty for all military detainees. We organized a rally to support pro-revolution officers that had been jailed in September of 2012.

In every meeting, there was always at least one member of the SCAF who appeared to favor the Muslim Brotherhood. When President Mohammed Morsi later reshuffled key military positions, the Brotherhood celebrated the decision as a major step toward reducing the army's influence over politics.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, along with many in Turkiye, also welcomed the move, seeing it as a positive development and a sign of closer alignment between Egypt's leadership and Islamist currents.

In November 2012, Morsi dismissed Mubarak's prosecutor general, Abdel Meguid Mahmoud. He was known to be an extremely corrupt man who had persecuted many activists and protected the political elite. While this was a much-needed change, we feared that Morsi's appointing someone from the Muslim Brotherhood as prosecutor general would allow them to manipulate the judiciary in Egypt and consolidate complete control over Egypt's political system.

The new prosecutor general began to criticize Hezbollah and Iran in Syria which alienated Iran. When the revolution started in 2011, Iranian media was praising the revolutionaries. Iranian media channels were inviting us to talk about our experience. When I agreed to an interview in 2011, I found the highest-ranking leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Mohammed Badei on air with me. Then to my great surprise, Khomeini came on air and began talking about the new era in the Middle East and the Islamic project. Iran had a long history of cooperation with the Muslim Brotherhood, especially about supporting Hamas in Palestine.

Iran expected Morsi to run Egypt exactly like Iran, crushing all opposition forces as was done in Iran in 1979.

The Muslim Brotherhood was even more threatening to liberals. They were dominating every sphere of political power in Egypt, including the military and the judicial system. Muslim Brotherhood members became more vocal about their intent to stay in power to implement their Islamic project in Egypt.

The Muslim Brotherhood did not hesitate to use violence to maintain control and crush protests. The turning point for me came with the killing of 16-year-old Gaber Salah, lovingly known as Jika, a young April 6 member. Jika participated in all the protests and mass sit-ins since January 25, 2011. A natural leader who his peers looked up to, Jika was known for the kindness he extended to friends and strangers alike. On November 20, 2012, hundreds of protesters had gathered outside the interior ministry to mark the anniversary of the clashes on Mohammed Mahmoud Street a year before. The irony of the security forces using violence as we protested against their violence was not lost on any of us. However, that day was particularly sorrowful because the security forces opened fire on the protesters, and took Jika's life. Seven bullets struck his head, arms, neck and chest; he was pronounced brain dead at the hospital. The Muslim Brotherhood members had given the police permission to shoot protesters again, and now we were in complete opposition to the Brotherhood. To us, there was little difference between them and the old regime.

Jika—the youngest April 6 member to be murdered by the security forces—was buried. Thousands attended his funeral which was widely covered inside and outside Egypt by the media. Jika wasn't the first (or the last) member of the April 6 Movement to die in clashes with police or the military. We had lost Ahmed Mansour during the 2011 Mohamed Mahmoud clashes. But Jika's killing touched people's hearts. He was a young leader and such a kind person to everyone. He supported Morsi with the April 6 Movement during the second round of elections. When he became the opposition - he was killed by soldiers. On a personal level, it was very sad because he was so young. I see the members of the April 6 Movement as my children and I hold myself responsible for what happens to them. I consider the consequences of my actions not only for myself

but for them as well. I was in shock when I heard that Jika had been shot. When Jika was in the hospital I prayed to God, begging him to save Jika but the doctors were clear that the bullet was in his brain and he was clinically dead.

I was angry at the response of the Muslim Brotherhood supporters who justified his killing by saying "the police and army need to protect buildings"; they always defended the police and the right of the police to use violence and weapons. Military supporters blamed me personally for Jika's death. They blamed me and April 6 for supporting the Muslim Brotherhood in the second round of elections. The Muslim Brotherhood supporters blamed me and April 6 for rejecting their bad politics. Jika's family didn't blame me. This mattered to me the most. But some people tried to use what happened to Jika to blame everyone who supported Morsi.

Morsi Makes Us Mad

Religious tolerance was at an all-time low under Morsi. The Islamists in power in Egypt were all Sunni Muslims (the sect of Islam followed by the majority of Egyptians). Many people belonging to religious minorities such as Shia Muslims and Baha'is, as well as atheists, were arrested on charges of denigrating Islam. In February 2012, Abdel Moneim al-Shahat, a Salafi leader, said publicly that the Baha'i faith posed a threat to Egypt's national security and that they would prosecute the Baha'i on charges of treason. They were then prevented from enrolling in public school. In November 2012, Shias were barred from entering the Al-Hussein Mosque on the request of Salafis. It became clear that only one stream of Islam was permitted in Morsi's Egypt.

The violence between revolutionaries and the Muslim Brotherhood increased; there was a growing political crisis in Egypt. In an attempt to find some solution, Morsi's office called many of us activists, including Esraa Abdel Fattah, Engy Hamdy, Wael Ghonim, Mustafa Nagar, Wael Khalil (representing Revolutionary Socialists), and Shady al-Ghazali Harb (Democratic Front Party). We accepted the invitation to meet Morsi, and met him in a big hall. We introduced ourselves, and he patiently listened to our criticism. I encouraged him to meet with other opposition

leaders such as Hamdeen Sabahi and Amr Moussa. He told us that he was independently making decisions, and not bound to the Muslim Brotherhood. He also repeated the same warnings of conspiracies and told us that he needed our support. Some of us were more aggressive, some more compromising. Al-Ghazalli was aggressive in his stance, criticizing his actions. Wael Ghonim was more compromising, advising Morsi that using religion in politics is turning people away from religion. People are disillusioned by religion itself when the Muslim Brotherhood is constantly lying. However, there were no changes after the meeting.

The Muslim Brotherhood focused its efforts on removing entrenched corruption and succeeded in reducing bureaucratic corruption in Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood created a diwan al-mezalim, an official department where corruption complaints could be reported. However, this department was not well-organized—it was overloaded with complaints and was understaffed, which made it inefficient and ineffective. Under the Brotherhood, torture in prisons was reduced and at first, more police exerted more control in their use of violence, which was immediately felt by Egyptians. However, this was quickly overshadowed by the tone of oppressiveness and deception that was being set under Morsi's rule.

The Muslim Brotherhood allowed the police to use violence and stop any protests against the Muslim Brotherhood, quickly adopting the same tactics as Mubarak. This was not something new. Even in 2011, brotherhood members had used violence in their protests to prevent other protesters from reaching the parliament building. At that time, they said that they were "protecting" the parliament against protesters coming to burn it down. Once Morsi got to power, they explained the need to maintain stability and claimed that there was a conspiracy against Islam to justify the use of violence. The other tactic used by the Muslim Brotherhood was lying and using religion for political gain. They justified their violence by saying that they were using it to defend Islam.

Salafis and more conservative members of the Muslim Brotherhood rallied against personal freedoms of belief and religion. They wanted to oppress homosexuality and exert increased censorship. The minister of culture had a strong religious background, and began to constrain a lot

of music and dance in Egypt. He even proposed to outlaw ballet. We held many demonstrations in front of the ministry of culture against these restrictions, and succeeded in preventing many of their proposals from coming to fruition. Our protests called out the government for focusing on things like the ballet instead of the rising price of gas. At least in Morsi's time, we had some agency. Even though he was using violence, it was a lot less compared to Mubarak's time. We were constantly protesting and criticizing the decisions of the Morsi government.

Dichotomy of Being a Revolutionary

In 2012, I found that many people who had followed me, now stood against me. Many detested the Muslim Brotherhood, and thought they had been too opportunistic and betrayed the revolution. They thought that supporting Morsi against Ahmed Shafik made me one with the Brotherhood. Professor Mahmoud Hamza, my employer, did not like the Muslim Brotherhood, and now considered me to be an enemy. He preferred Shafik to Morsi, considering the Muslim Brotherhood to be evil. He fired me from my job in the beginning of 2013.

One day, as I walked on the street, I came across a simple family dressed in traditional Egyptian clothes. They recognized me and told me that they blamed me for helping the Muslim Brotherhood come to power, which led Egypt into chaos. They believed that once in the government, the Muslim Brotherhood would never relinquish power voluntarily. They asked me, *If the April 6 Movement stands for democracy and fights for justice, how can we support the Muslim Brotherhood?* This encounter motivated me to join many demonstrations as I reflected on the impact of Morsi and the Brotherhood's actions on everyday people across Egypt.

Some officials in the government admitted that the Muslim Brotherhood had made many mistakes but that they would eventually learn and adopt democratic practices as they gained more experience in their day-to-day ruling of the country and would eventually embrace democratic ideals that revolution pushed for that helped them ascend to power in the first place. Often the same people holding this naïve belief tended to end the conversation, saying that members of the Muslim Brotherhood, even if not committed to democracy, were *at least not jihadists*! These officials warned



UN Human Rights Day with Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

Photo by Dylan Jet.

of a coup against the Morsi government that would bring the military back into power and would completely crush all hopes for building real democracy in Egypt. Indeed, the prospect of a military coup frightened us all.

The Muslim Brotherhood was quick to change their attitude towards me when I criticized them, and spread the same rumors about me as the military did. I felt like I was seen by many Egyptians as a traitor or as a spy.

However, when I traveled abroad, I felt respected by common people who had followed news of the revolution. Egyptians from the diaspora told me how proud they felt of being Egyptian after the revolution. On December 10, 2012—Human Rights Day—I was invited by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in New York to participate in a panel discussion titled *My Voice Counts*, which highlighted the importance of inclusion and the right to participate in public life. Joining other young activists from around the world—Jeremy Heimans from Australia, Chenet Torrilus from Haiti, and Pauline Wanja from Kenya—we spoke alongside United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights Ivan Šimonović. The event brought together voices from diverse movements,

from online organizing to grassroots activism, reflecting a shared commitment to civic engagement and democratic participation. Being recognized by Ban Ki-moon in his keynote address as one of the young changemakers was a profoundly meaningful moment for me and for our movement, symbolizing international acknowledgment of our efforts to promote freedom and justice in Egypt.

SCAF did not want any revolutionary to get too much attention in the international community. They had to pay millions of dollars to lobbyists in Washington to do their bidding, while we would meet with officials in the US government that even they could not get meetings with. They did not want us to bring focus to their abuses of power which could threaten the foreign military aid Egypt receives from the US.

Fight for the Constitution

The fight for Egypt's constitution was also on. The first constitutional assembly that was formed after the Presidential elections was completely dominated by Islamists. An agreement was made in June 2012 to create a more balanced assembly which was supposed to be more inclusive. I was elected by the parliament to be a member of the constitutional assembly and I proposed a referendum within our movement about whether or not to accept this position. The majority voted in favor of me joining, hoping that we could bring about change from within the constitutional assembly. The Muslim Brotherhood asked me to be an assistant to the president for connecting with civil society. I refused this position because it seemed like a bribe to me. I wanted to maintain my freedom to criticize the Muslim Brotherhood and not be part of their official network.

The demands of the revolution had not been met. We called for large protests in October 2012 to form a representative constitution, economic improvements and justice for martyrs of the revolution. It had become increasingly clear to us that the Muslim Brotherhood were vying for Islamist political hegemony and pushing for Egypt to become a theocratic state. These protests were in solidarity with us who were pushing for freedom of speech and religion within the constitutional assembly.

The Muslim Brotherhood was not listening to anyone in the constitutional assembly. Many non-Islamist members were beginning to resign



Constitutional Assembly begins.

from the Assembly in June, complaining of their voices going unheard. Four of those liberal members rejoined in September to push for a more balanced constitution. At this time, I refused to resign because I still thought that there was hope to push for some positive reforms. On November 15, I froze my membership in the Constitutional Assembly in protest. All proposals made by civil forces, political movements and civil society organizations were ignored in the Assembly which was still dominated by Islamists. I demanded certain reforms such as increased diversity as conditions for my return, but none of them were met. I joined the long list of members who had resigned and activists that had boycotted the Assembly.

The new constitution written in 2012 was very similar to the constitution of 1973. They did not respect any of the deals that we had made, and any advice we gave went unheard. They insisted on sharia law and were unwilling to compromise. They gave some increased independence to the judiciary and military but failed to make big changes that would promote democracy. Morsi issued a constitutional declaration in November 2012 that prevented the Assembly from being dissolved by the judiciary and essentially secured the dominance of Islamists in matters of the constitution.

The newly drafted constitution did not have enough mechanisms to protect and ensure social justice. It contained articles that would restrict free speech through Article 31, which states that "insulting or showing contempt toward any human being shall be prohibited." It also immensely increased the powers given to the President, allowing him to appoint one tenth of the Shura council and giving him the right to dismiss and appoint civil and military personnel. This restored the powers held by the President in Egypt under the previous constitution, giving him nearly dictatorial control of the country. It also did not include the demands of the revolutionaries to protect religious freedoms and women's rights. It did not represent the values of freedom, equality, and dignity that the revolution stood for.

The new constitution was voted on by referendum in December 2012. We organized a lot of events to campaign for a "No" vote on the constitution because it was blatantly against all the ideals that the revolution stood for. We used the slogan "Your Constitution Does Not Represent Us." We drove throughout Cairo with loudspeakers attached to our cars, urging citizens to vote "no". We distributed tens of thousands of flyers every day and painted graffiti. We even released a song with the title, "Say no to the constitution." We chanted that Egyptians demanded bread, freedom, and social justice, but all that the Muslim Brotherhood gives us is more martyrs, dictators, and chaos.

Despite our best efforts, the referendum passed with a 63% vote. The constitution was adopted.

Morsi was quickly becoming an elected authoritarian. The Muslim Brotherhood wanted to seize complete control and refused to share their newfound authority to meaningfully reform institutions within Egypt. All of our advice and suggestions fell on deaf ears. Morsi's moves to expand and seize power did not go unnoticed. Hundreds of thousands of protesters came out on the streets protesting his new decree issued on November 22, 2012, giving himself the power to "take all necessary measures against any potential threat to the revolution." Morsi was now the threat to what the revolution stood for: a successful democratic transition. When thousands of protesters gathered for a sit-in outside the presidential palace on December 4, 2012, supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood surrounded the

protesters, threw firebombs, and tore down tents. Morsi then appointed a new minister of interior in January 2013, Mohamed Ibrahim Moustafa, who was exceptionally bloody and cruel. As peaceful protesters faced violence both from the police and from Morsi's supporters, Morsi's legitimacy had completely dissipated among revolutionaries.

A new opposition, including disenchanted liberals and Mubarak supporters, united against the Muslim Brotherhood. The Salvation Front was formed, led by Amr Moussa, Hamdeen Sabahi, and ElBaradei. It was a coalition of Mubarak supporters who backed Amr Moussa, Nasserists who supported Sabahi, and liberals who favored ElBaradei. We did not join this coalition because supporters of Amr Moussa wanted to return Egypt to a military dictatorship. We found that many of the people in this front belonged to Mubarak's family, intelligence and state security. ElBaradei believed that there was no longer a difference between revolutionaries and the Mubarak regime because we are united in opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood. We, as the April 6 Movement, could not agree to work with security officials from Mubarak's regime, and we were not in favor of returning to Mubarak-style rule just to overthrow Morsi.

We were being attacked from all sides. We were hated by the police and Mubarak supporters because we had enabled Morsi to win. Some liberals, who opposed the Muslim Brotherhood, were also against us. The Muslim Brotherhood was also spreading rumors about us and attacking us in their internal messages because we now opposed them. The military media outlets and internal messages were to also propagate these rumors that the April 6 Movement was intent on destroying Egypt. They even said that we supported the Muslim Brotherhood.

The April 6 Movement, at least in the beginning, was trying to help Morsi succeed. This caused a lot of division within the movement and we lost many supporters. We did not want the Muslim Brotherhood to fail, despite our differences. They were focused on an Islamic state but the alternative was the military regime. After all, it was a democratic experiment and we wanted this transition period to succeed. One of the most common problems facing Egyptians was garbage and traffic. The Muslim Brotherhood was actively trying to resolve these crises.

However, the Muslim Brotherhood kept pushing for antidemocratic

changes such as in the constitution which led us to lose faith in their intentions for a democratic Egypt. Jika's murder was the straw that broke the camel's back. After Jika was killed during a peaceful protest, we could not defend them anymore in any way. They had gone too far, and the differences between the old regime and the new were quickly dissipating.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Military Intervention or a Revolution

2013: Reckoning With Two Bad Options

2013 was the worst year of my life. It was filled with violence, bloodshed, and disappointment. It was also the year when the April 6 Movement faced the biggest dilemma so far—whether or not to cooperate with the new opposition. The new "secular opposition" against Morsi was strong because it was now backed by the powerful elite of Mubarak's regime. We could not defend or support the Muslim Brotherhood, and we did not trust former Mubarak loyalists or the military.

Our position was that we were a revolutionary youth group, advocating for democracy and pushing for accountability and good governance.

The military stood for stability and its own interest in remaining the powerbroker. The Islamists longed for Islamic rule while the revolutionaries stood for principles. We wanted freedom, equality, dignity, and justice.

For us, Morsi was an elected authoritarian. The Muslim Brotherhood wanted to seize complete control and refused to share their newfound authority to meaningfully reform institutions within Egypt. All of our advice and suggestions fell on deaf ears. Morsi's moves to expand and seize power did not go unnoticed. Hundreds of thousands of protesters came out on the streets protesting his new decree issued in November 2012, giving himself the power to "take all necessary measures against any potential threat to the revolution". Ironically enough, he was now the threat to what the revolution stood for: a successful democratic transition.

When thousands of protesters gathered for a sit-in outside the presidential palace in December 2012, supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood surrounded the protesters, threw firebombs, and tore down tents. Morsi then appointed a new minister of interior in January 2013, Mohamed Ibrahim Moustafa, who was exceptionally bloody and cruel. As peaceful protesters faced violence both from the police as well as Morsi's supporters, Morsi's legitimacy had completely dissipated among revolutionaries.

We continued to use humor and sarcasm to criticize Morsi. We wanted to steer younger Egyptians away from guns and towards laughs—the stronger of the two weapons against a bombastic ruler. In February 2013, my brother Mostafa and his friends came up with an idea. They wanted to send Morsi to outer space. The deodorant company, Axe, was collaborating with Space Expedition Corp to send a few lucky people to space, chosen through an online popularity contest. We posted a picture of Morsi photoshopped into a white space suit on our Facebook group with the description "With God's help, and under His care, Morsi will soon be launched to the moon." Within a few hours of our post, the hashtag #SendMorsiToTheMoon started trending and tens of thousands of people signed on to our initiative, putting Morsi in the lead of the Axe contest. In the next two days, his name was removed from the contest site by Axe, but it was as close to a win as we could get that year. Even during these violent and turbulent times, we believed nonviolent actions, with the help of biting satire, was the way forward to fight the undemocratic forces.

After Jika was buried, we organized many events to call for accountability and justice against those responsible for his killing. However, all that the ministry of interior did was to conduct a sham investigation. No one was held responsible for his death. In April 2013, we organized a large march against the general prosecutor who we blamed for not delivering justice for Jika's death. However, our demonstration was met by significant violence from the police. The police used bird shot, leaving many people injured.

Worsening Crisis

Morsi's presidency was failing on many fronts. Economic failure was felt deeply by most Egyptians throughout Morsi's presidency. The government



Mohammed Morsi / Axe Body Spray Contest.

did not have enough cash to secure imports which led to a fuel shortage. Farmers could not secure enough fuel for their pumps to irrigate their fields. In March 2013, many people were killed in gas-line gunfights. Food prices soared as the economic crisis deepened and electricity shortages persisted throughout the summer. Under Morsi, unemployment and inflation had both risen to 13% and 8% respectively. While the economic downturn was not Morsi's fault, we felt that Morsi had been unable to improve the economy because he was preoccupied with securing political power. Furthermore, increasing his political power meant that he would be solely blamed for all the economic problems facing Egypt.

The other aspect which frightened many of us was the overwhelming Islamization of the government. Despite promises of inclusiveness and representation in his government, Morsi had only tightened grip on power by the Muslim Brotherhood. Prime Minister Qandil added two more Muslim Brotherhood members to his cabinet. Morsi then appointed seventeen new governors, most of whom were from the Muslim Brotherhood. He appointed Adel Khayat as the governor of Luxor who was a member of Al-Gama'a Al-Islamiyya, a group implicated in the attacks on tourists in 1997. They again parroted the rumors that any opposition to

their rule was a "conspiracy against Islam".

Peaceful protests were met with violence. This deeply polarized the people and divided them into two camps: for or against the Brotherhood. Freedom of expression was often struck down violently, and the minister of interior continued using violence. This could not be done without the authorization of the Brotherhood, and so people blamed them for the continued violence and chaos in the streets.

Petition Drive Against Morsi

Tamarrod, meaning "revolt", was a grassroots protest movement founded by activists from the Kefaya movement. In May 2013, Tamarrod started gathering signatures for a petition expressing a vote of no confidence in President Morsi. Their stated goal was to return power to the Egyptian people through mobilization on the streets. By building momentum, they aimed to ultimately force Morsi out of office and call for early presidential elections.

The petition that Egyptians were asked to sign went as follows:

> *We withdraw our confidence in Mohammed Morsi*
> - *Because security has still not returned to the streets*
> - *Because the poor still don't have a place in society*
> - *Because we are still begging outside actors (the government took a $4.8 billion loan from the IMF)*
> - *Because there is still no justice for the Martyrs (of the revolution)*
> - *Because there is still no dignity for Egyptians or our country*
> - *Because the economy has collapsed*
> - *Because we are following Americans*
>
> *And so, I am signing this with my full intention to withdraw my confidence in Mohammed Morsi who has failed to achieve any of the demands of the revolution, and is not fit to govern Egypt.*

By June 2013, the first anniversary of Morsi's presidency, Tamarrod claimed to have collected 22 million signatures for their petition to depose Morsi. Everyone had thrown their support behind the signature campaign, including Mohammed ElBaradei and Ahmed Shafik. Egypt

is a conservative community, resistant to change. However, when the mistakes of the Muslim Brotherhood became apparent and clashes were widespread, more people began to lose faith in the Brotherhood to deliver on their election promises.

The April 6 Movement agreed to join the Tamarrod movement in the summer of 2013. We wanted to work from within the movement to call for early presidential elections, and gathered over a million signatures for this cause. We saw this as the only alternative to Morsi's regime and an eventual military coup. I wrote many articles and continued to speak publicly against a military coup, and we tried maintaining a distance between us and members of the Mubarak regime and military intelligence who were in support of a coup. April 6 focused its efforts on working with the Revolutionary Socialists, other left–wing groups, and human rights activists to try to push for new presidential elections. We were a small minority in a polarized political environment where the options were that you could either support the Muslim Brotherhood or a military coup.

There were key indicators of the heavy-handed role of the military in allowing and even promoting the mass protests. Some called us the "Leftist Kids" in the media because we were against the Muslim Brotherhood as well as the military taking power. When our former colleagues, Mohammed Abdel Aziz and Mahmoud Badr, asked us to join the Salvation Front, we had refused because we did not agree with their ideology. Both Badr and Abdel Aziz had a Nasserist background, and had split from the April 6 Movement in 2009 after spreading rumors about our movement being an agent of the West. They had continued to cooperate with the military, and by 2013 the Nasserists were in favor of military rule. However, we had joined Tamarrod because we wanted to take the protests in a different direction and call for early elections that could restore democracy. We had hoped that by joining a grassroots movement, we would be able to shape the demands of the protesters and gear them towards human rights and democracy.

Many groups had resorted to violence against the Brotherhood. On February 1, as we went to protest in front of the presidential palace, some protesters carried out attacks, throwing stones and Molotov cocktails against the Brotherhood's headquarters. We, as April 6, did not believe this was the right path forward. We did not participate in violent activities.

Instead, we tried to hold peaceful demonstrations and focused our efforts on using symbolic tactics, humor and sarcasm to criticize Morsi.

By the end of June, I was receiving messages from my friends that the military was about to take power, and I with the April 6 Movement could either be with them or against them. The messages warned me that there was no third party—I could choose to either be part of the new regime or be loyal to the Brotherhood. I was told that ElBaradei supported the military intervention, and I personally asked him why. He told me that this was the only way to get the Muslim Brotherhood out of power. However, I could not betray my beliefs. Military intervention was not a democratic means to remove Morsi from power, no matter how opposed we were to his presidency.

Morsi gave a long speech on June 26, 2013, which angered and disappointed many Egyptians. He signaled to the opposition that if they do not like his government, they should work to form a parliamentary majority in the next elections. He reaffirmed his support for the ministry of interior and the armed forces that had been responsible for violent repression of protesters. This speech was meant to appease the military but all it really did was anger ordinary Egyptians.

On June 30, we participated in large anti-Morsi demonstrations with millions of people in Tahrir Square, demanding that he step down immediately. The eyes of the world were fixed on Egypt again. I was calling members of the Muslim Brotherhood such as Dr. Mohammed El-Beltagi and Osama Yaseen (who still remain in prison) to take this seriously, and that the tide against them was getting stronger.

What unseated Morsi was not the protests alone, but the army stepping in and capitalizing on this popular wave to advance its objectives. At the time, we did not realize that by joining the Tamarrod campaign, we had unwittingly entered a Faustian bargain—a deal focused on short-term gains while ignoring its long-term consequences. The secular opposition wanted Morsi out of power no matter the cost or the arrangements required.

Military Intervention

Even though Morsi was incompetent, favored Islamists, and lied constantly, he had risen to power through an electoral process.

During his tenure, the power struggle between the military and Morsi's regime escalated dramatically. In August 2012, Morsi had forced the retirement of Tantawi and other senior generals in the army. He fired and replaced the head of intelligence and the commander of the Presidential Guard. He appointed Salah Abdel Maqsoud, a Muslim Brotherhood member, as the minister of information, and reshuffled the heads of many state-run newspapers and media outlets. While Muslim Brotherhood supporters saw this change as progress towards civilian control over state affairs, others believed it was an attempt at Islamist consolidation and domination. The military simply saw this as a threat to their political and economic influence and power in Egypt.

On July 1, 2013, Abdel Fatah el-Sisi issued an ultimatum on state television. He said that Morsi had 48 hours to respond to the protests, or else the military would step in. Morsi answered by calling for a national unity government, and promising to review four articles in the constitution related to sharia that were of utmost importance to liberals—concessions that were not nearly enough to quell the protests. Also, there was widespread mistrust towards the Brotherhood who had broken their promises time and again.

Two days later, on July 3, 2013, el-Sisi announced the ouster of Morsi and the military placed him under house arrest. After the army deposed Morsi, Abdel Fatah el-Sisi assumed executive power. He suspended the constitution and named Adly Mansour, the chief justice of the supreme constitutional court, Egypt's interim president.

On July 3, I was invited by many channels to speak about the revolution. In all my communications, I urged the Muslim Brotherhood to accept Morsi's ouster and announce early presidential elections. This would be the only way to avert a coup and continue down a democratic path. The Brotherhood members believed that the Coptic Church was behind the demonstration, as Copts from across Egypt had participated in anti-Morsi protests. They began to burn churches and attack Copts on the streets, resulting in tremendous chaos.

I had hoped that the military would agree to put in place a transitional body until new elections were held. We encouraged both sides to engage in reconciliation talks. However, both sides remained extremely rigid and

refused to participate in any dialogue. I also thought that the West, especially the United States, would remain staunchly in favor of democracy. Senator McCain and Lady Ashton tried to push for reconciliation but to no avail.

Until July 3, I had hope. However, I was wrong. Following the military takeover, the oppression of the Muslim Brotherhood was immediate and brutal. When I went to interview at the City of Media Production, a media channel owned by the government, I found out that the police and the military had attacked many media channels that were defending the Muslim Brotherhood. Journalists were arrested under the pretext that they would incite violence. I was shocked because oppression of free speech never bodes well. Some liberals I knew sided with the military, but I cautioned them that they could just as easily mute their voices.

There was a lot of money that poured in to support the military intervention. Within a week of Morsi's ouster, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates approved $8 billion in aid (central bank deposits, energy products, and cash).[1] They felt that a successful democratic transition in Egypt would threaten their own interests and weaken their hold on power while people throughout the Arab world questioned the legitimacy of their authoritarian rule. Iran also joined in support of the protests against Morsi because he and the Muslim Brotherhood supported many Sunni militias in Syria that were fighting against Iranian forces.

After The Military Intervention: Silencing All Opposition

During the months building up to the military intervention, the April 6 Movement, including myself, were targeted by the state-controlled media. We were called "enemies of the state" and this straight propaganda made me and many of our members the target of violence on the streets. After the intervention, the opposition against us only intensified. Military supporters resorted to violence against me whenever they saw me on the streets. Mubarak backers were now newly empowered and many of them sought revenge. It was now not safe for me to walk on the street alone. I made sure that I was always surrounded by a group of friends.

Before June 30, the Muslim Brotherhood wanted to hold pro-Morsi demonstrations in Tahrir Square. However, as anti-Muslim Brotherhood



Lady Catherine Ashton, High Representative of the EU.

demonstrators were already in Tahrir Square, the leaders of the Brotherhood were advised to hold their demonstrations elsewhere to avoid clashes. As a result, Brotherhood supporters held demonstrations in the Raba'a area of Cairo which is home to a mosque and hospital catering to the poor. After the military forced Morsi to step down, thousands of supporters of Morsi occupied two squares: Raba'a al-Adawiya in Nasr City, Cairo and al-Nahda in Giza. They vowed to continue their sit-in until Morsi was reinstated. The April 6 Movement did not join the pro-intervention demonstrations; nor did we join pro-Brotherhood demonstrations. However, many people who did not support the Muslim Brotherhood still decided to participate in the sit-ins against the military intervention.

Arguably, the two most powerful political forces in the country were now engaged in an existential fight with one another. The two most powerful political forces in the country were now engaged in an existential struggle with one another. Ironically, what united them both was their fight with the April 6 Movement, and with me, as one of its key leaders. Morsi supporters would go after me saying that I supported the military intervention in politics, and supporters of the military intervention in politics blamed me for backing the Brotherhood.

I was using public transportation to get around because my car had been destroyed in an accident in June 2013. I had to be very careful to avoid being caught in the melee between both sides, and to not make myself too visible a target for either side to take aim at me. The pro-military and pro-Brotherhood fought each other in metro stations, buses, and in the streets across Egypt. Egypt was polarized and everyone thought that giving an inch to the other side meant an irreversible loss to their group. It was a zero-sum game with terrifying consequences for Egyptians. The Egyptian public at large that came out to protests simply wanted Morsi gone, which was in the interest of the military.

I attempted to moderate between the Muslim Brotherhood leaders and government representatives to find a solution and an end to violence. I tried to mediate between the Muslim Brotherhood leaders and government representatives to find a solution and end the violence. I made calls to the top members of the military, Amr Moussa, ElBaradei, and anyone I could reach to find a solution. I made calls to the Vatican, and anyone I could reach to find a solution. I also tried to promote dialogue between domestic parties while reaching out to foreign intermediaries. I met with US and EU representatives, including US senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, and the High Representative of the European Union, Lady Catherine Ashton, when they visited Cairo. All my attempts failed. The Muslim Brotherhood was not interested in cooperating with the military, and they would not talk to the SCAF until Morsi was reinstated as the legitimate President. The military wanted no negotiation with the Brotherhood. They wanted them out of power completely.

One of my friends, Shadi al-Ghazali Harb, organized a meeting on July 10 between the new interim president Adly Mansour and the original revolutionary voices, including Esraa Abdel Fattah and me. Shadi was a liberal and wanted to send a message of compromise. We thought this could be the first step in finding common ground and working toward a better transition. Imbued with romantic ideas of reconciliation, I told Mansour that our efforts could end the violence. With fake smiles, he kept coming back to one idea: we should travel to the West and spread the word that there was no military intervention in Egypt. None of us agreed.

We would not travel abroad to lie on their behalf. We decided to wait and see how things played out. Our support for the transitional road map to new elections was predicated on the military's pledge to not interfere in Egypt's political life.

After the meeting, I announced that I will not be a mouthpiece for the military. I took a principled stance and continued to publicly express my opinion against the military junta that had seized power. The state backed media doubled its efforts accusing me of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood. Many of my friends turned against me and publicly criticized me for not siding with SCAF.

Many people who did not support the Muslim Brotherhood still decided to join the Brotherhood-led sit-in at Raba'a because they were against the military intervention in politics. Six weeks into the sit-in, on August 14, 2013, the military carried out the worst single day massacre in modern Egyptian history. To clear out Raba'a Square, the military and the police used bulldozers, armored personnel carriers and snipers. As they open fired on the protesters, it is estimated that over a 1000 men, women and children were slaughtered. Raba'a became a word associated with death in Egypt. And yet, the Raba'a massacre did not backfire on the military and failed to galvanize more people against its unconstitutional grab on power.

Certainly, there was a tiny minority of extremists at the sit-in who were carrying light weapons and had used them against the military and even other protesters. The leaders of the Brotherhood knew that some people had weapons but let them participate in the protests anyway, which did not garner them any favor from the majority of Egyptians. The media propagated the image of the Islamists, Brotherhood members, and other protesters at Raba'a as armed terrorists, and this helped the regime downplay the crimes committed against these Egyptians who took a stand against the authorities.

We stood against the arrest of the Muslim Brotherhood members, the Raba'a massacre and the shutting down of Islamic media channels. We were by no means supporters of the Brotherhood. Rather, we intensely disliked them when they were in power. But, at the same time, we were firmly against the oppressive new regime that had supplanted them. I

could not condone repression and violence, regardless of which side perpetuated it.

Many people, including activists and intellectuals with secular and Islamist leanings, left Egypt. I could leave as well, but I did not want to run. Even though I had been offered scholarships and fellowships from Western universities, I did not take any serious steps to leave Egypt. At the time, the idea of abandoning my country felt akin to abandoning my family. This was my home, and for better or worse, I needed to see what the future would hold. I wanted to remain in Egypt and continue defending the revolution. I still dreamt of tolerant Egypt where people could express themselves freely. Since I decided to stay in Egypt, the most rational choice should have been to defend the new government. It would have been safer for me and my loved ones.

The April 6 Movement was especially targeted after the revolution and even more so after the military intervention. I began to receive messages that the military intelligence was hell-bent on destroying the April 6 Movement because we still had credibility among Egyptians. Many Egyptians still saw us as an authentic grassroots force that had awakened Egyptians to mobilize and bring down their military dictator. We had set a perilous precedent of people power—of ordinary Egyptians taking their fate into their own hands and bringing significant political change in the country—and we did this without their approval.

The security institutions were after us, determined to stop our activism completely. We were deemed spies, traitors and agents of the West, receiving money from abroad to sow chaos within Egypt. Of course, all these rumors were false, but they caused a great deal of upheaval in our movement. The security forces amplified this chaos by embedding provocateurs in our organization to stoke divisions and pass information to the military.

Where We Failed

The Arab Spring, as many observers around the world had called the events in the Middle East starting in 2011, had effectively ended. After Tunisia, we were the second country in the Middle East where people rose up and brought down a long-time head of the regime and did so

while remaining predominantly nonviolent in their defiance. However, the long-term outcome of our revolution was unlike that of what Tunisians achieved.

Egypt and Tunisia have a lot in common historically. They were both part of the Ottoman Empire, under which both enjoyed high levels of autonomy. Their local rulers had modernized their military in the process of robust nation-building. For over half a century, both countries were ruled by autocrats who commanded a deeply entrenched security apparatus to subdue their populations.

Egyptians and Tunisians have suffered similar hardships. Both countries were plagued by corruption and mired in incompetence. Both countries adopted neoliberal policies that enriched the few and impoverished the many. And though the common people had unseated dictators in both countries, our paths would quickly diverge. After the revolution, the Tunisian military took a step back by handing over power to a national unity government that consisted of opposition party members, activists, and members of their old guard. In Egypt, SCAF took control. After elections, Tunisia carefully balanced the clashing Islamists and secularists whereas in Egypt Islamists went on to dominate the government entirely.

In order to understand why our revolution did not bring about democracy, it is important to look at the underlying forces at work that have been a product of decades of totalitarian rule.

In my view, the greatest obstacle to democratic reform in Egypt has been the absence of a self-organized civil society that would organically develop, implement and practice democratic principles independently of the regime. This includes non-discrimination, nonviolent approaches to conflict waging and resolution of conflict, consensus-seeking and building, self-help, aid for those unjustly prosecuted, and defense of civil and human rights within their own spheres of professional and economic activities, as well as in their public and personal engagements.

The only time in Egypt's history when real democratic institutions and the first inklings of civil society began to form was after Egypt got its independence from the British in 1922, interestingly enough through mass mobilization of ordinary men and women that used nonviolent resistance actions against the colonizing power to push for independence. This

democratic experiment was cut short by Nasser's coup in 1952. After that it was the Arab Republic of Egypt, in which no dissent was permitted. For many years, Nasser's totalitarian regime ruled over Egypt. Society was subdued through the military, the security institutions and the centralized economy.

After Sadat came to power in 1970, he established a new constitution in which nominal political parties were allowed. Right wing and left wing parties were created under the strict control of the authorities, leading to a weak political system that did not allow for open discourse and free political participation.

When Mubarak took power in 1981, he implemented neoliberal policies that advanced crony capitalism in Egypt and empowered a few key business people loyal to their political backers and interested in propping up and prolonging authoritarian rule.

The Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis mostly worked secretly in mosques to grow their following. Since the Muslim Brotherhood embraced and adhered to nonviolent principles in vying for political influence, they were given some political space under Sadat and Mubarak. They used charities to broaden their support among ordinary Egyptians. The Muslim Brotherhood was deft at using the fear of religion to indoctrinate their followers. Salafis had cut a deal with the Mubarak government not to interfere in politics in exchange for their control over mosques that were the main conduit to spread Wahhabist ideology, at least until the 2011 revolution. Since Islamists were the major organizing force in an overwhelmingly conservative Egyptian society, people were wary of a political change.

We were the progressives. We wanted democracy—the absolute antithesis of authoritarian rule. We believed in human rights, freedom of expression and the right to elect our own government. We sought separation and balance of power within different branches of government so that presidential powers will always be constitutionally limited, and political accountability clearly articulated to prevent government abuses and dictatorial overreach. Our hope for a better life rested on the realization of true democratic values. After the revolution, when the Muslim Brotherhood managed to capture formal levers of power and became a major threat

to the prospect of realizing our democratic dreams, many progressives saw allying with the "old state" (the military) as the only viable way to remove it from power by any, even undemocratic means. In my view, this was a huge mistake. Achieving democratic ends can hardly, if ever, be justified through undemocratic and violent means, by forces like the military, which historically have neither upheld nor genuinely practiced democracy. In fact, democracy and the military in Egypt stood at opposing ends. Such a Faustian deal was destined to fail.

The real solution would have been long term. It would be to build real political parties and ideological streams founded on popular support. This would first require a strong civil society. A strong civil society entails having various actors that make up a civil society consolidate their interests, bridge gaps, and create a feasible alternative against the military and the Muslim Brotherhood. My ideas to build a real civil society never materialized; there was just not enough time. Under Mubarak, there was no true civil society or opposition. Human rights defenders had no autonomy, and the only activities allowed were for those activists who worked with Suzanne Mubarak. Anyone who had a conflicting point of view or resisted her vision, was immediately shut down. After the revolution, there was no time to build one either because of the election battles and demonstrations. There were many initiatives and new political parties after 2011, many NGOs that started to work again, but one or two years was not enough to build a strong enough civil society that could help and support democracy.

Pro-democracy movements and Egypt's civil society are not strong enough yet to face or create a balance between the Brotherhood and the military. We have two dominant parties, and I believe the third opposing force will be civil society—not the liberals or the April 6 Movement, but a stronger civil society that truly represents the broader community. The idea is that, with time and a solid plan, we can build a strong civil society composed of political parties, independent workers' unions, autonomous syndicates, social movements and other related organizations. This would strengthen the country far more effectively than the efforts of the Muslim Brotherhood and the military.

Maybe if the revolutionary forces had been unified behind one



Ahmed Maher and President Jimmy Carter. The Carter Center monitored elections with the April 6 Movement.

candidate in the 2012 presidential elections, perhaps even behind Amr Moussa who came from the old regime and ran in the first round of the presidential elections, we might actually have had a chance for a more successful transition. He was willing to talk to the revolutionary youths, was not all that corrupt, and did not hail from the military. This constituted the characteristics needed in a president that could guide us through a transition period and gain more time for the revolutionary forces to grow stronger rather than weaker. The state and bureaucracy would also not have resisted Moussa as much as it did Morsi. However, our radical views prevented us from accepting Amr Moussa as a candidate. We wanted

someone with unshakable democratic credentials. We were perhaps too idealistic rather than strategic in the choices we had in front of us. We were able to bring down a repressive, entrenched ruler with our shrewd strategies, but we fell woefully short on devising and implementing similarly astute strategies in post-revolution Egypt that would ensure that the fall of the dictator will not open the way for another one in quick succession.

Cooperation among key players, even if it was not complete unity—cooperation such that the "others" are not immediately deemed traitors and their different groups do not call for a monopoly over the truth—may have allowed for a more successful transition.

We underestimated the military and its shrewdness in playing the intuitional game of politics and using violence in both indiscriminate and targeted ways. We must learn from our mistakes, draw lessons from strategic failures and make sure that when we create the next opportunity to change Egypt—and we will—we, the revolutionary democrats, will be successful in not only overseeing the collapse of yet another dictatorship but preparing society and ourselves to wage another and no less important battle to bring about democracy using both institutional politics and street actions.

CHAPTER NINE

Silencing All Opposition

I continued to travel outside Egypt to speak about the situation in my country. In September 2013, I spoke at a Forum 2000* panel in Prague, Czech Republic, on *Societies in Transition: Do We Have Universal Aspirations?* in which the Dalai Lama was also speaking. When I told him I was from Egypt, he said, "You have a long road ahead. I wish you good luck."

At the Forum, I said that Egypt was in a transitional phase, that this phase was complex, and we were witnessing ups and downs, but certainly, the future would be better.[1] I added that we would not be silent about human rights abuses in Egypt. We, the youth who carried out the revolution, would not accept the return of the Mubarak regime or the police state, no matter how hard they tried. I emphasized the role of civil society and the importance of studying transitional periods after the revolutions in Eastern Europe in the 1990s and early 2000s, including in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Poland, and Serbia. Just as democracy in Europe did not happen suddenly and the transitional period lasted many years, Egypt also needed time. Engaged civil society was the key to building healthy institutions. At the time, I

* Forum 2000 is a foundation founded in 1996 as a joint initiative of the Czech President Václav Havel, the Japanese philanthropist Yohei Sasakawa, and the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel. It holds a conference every year in Prague under the same name that brings together people from all over the world to discuss the most important present-day issues and challenges.



Forum 2000 participants release balloons in Havel Square, Prague, on behalf of imprisoned political prisoners.

failed to comprehend how total, brutal, and immediate the oppression of Egyptian civil society would be in the months to come.

Hundreds of protesters were killed, many more were arrested, and there was a chokehold on freedom of information, with human rights being flagrantly violated. The new rule would have to be maintained by force in perpetuity. On September 12, 2013, Egypt's de facto authorities extended the state of emergency by two months and used this time to consolidate absolute control over the media and the streets. With the help of their political appointees and crony stooges, they tried to discredit the April 6 Movement and other symbols of the 2011 revolution.

Protest Law: An End to Freedom of Assembly

Following the Raba'a massacre, protests took place every Friday, with Muslim Brotherhood members sometimes joined by revolutionaries, demonstrating all across the country in opposition to the military rule. President Adly Mansour announced in the fall of 2013 that he intended to bring back "stability" through new laws and curb the chaotic forces trying to undermine Egypt's security.

And so came into being Law No. 107 of 2013, better known as the Protest Law, approved by the cabinet of ministers in October (while the

parliament was suspended) and ratified by President Adly Mansour on November 24, 2013. That same day, the April 6 Movement and other revolutionary groups condemned the law, fearing correctly that it was a move to stifle freedom of peaceful assembly. Under this law, the Ministry of Interior acquired broad discretionary powers to oversee protests, such as the right to ban any meeting of a public nature of more than ten people. It also gave the security forces free rein to use excessive, even lethal, force against demonstrators.

I publicly said that the Protest Law was undemocratic and, if implemented, would suffocate the activism that had given us hope for a better Egypt. The law was a clear violation of the most basic freedoms we had fought for during the revolution. It would take us back to the Mubarak era, overturning any democratic gains we had made over the last two years.

The April 6 Movement had become the main component of a new coalition of groups that opposed the military intervention and the Muslim Brotherhood, known as the "Revolution Way Front." We wanted to be the third voice, an alternative to the political polarization of the past few months. We hoped to represent and advance the original demands of the revolution—bread, freedom, and social justice—and not to seek revenge against those with whom we disagree politically.

As part of this coalition, we announced that we would hold protests on November 27, 2013, outside the Shura Council (a legislative body of the parliament) against the Protest Law and against the provision to try civilians in military courts. Although I never went to this protest, we publicly supported it. During the demonstration, the police used heavy violence against the protesters. They arrested many protesters, even though they were not causing any disruptions. The prosecutor general issued an arrest warrant for Alaa Abdel Fattah and me, accusing us of calling for protests. Security forces arrested Alaa after raiding his home, and said that they were looking for me. Alaa and I, to recount the words of the prosecutor general from the arrest warrants he issued for us, had become prime targets of the state for "encouraging protests in violation of the law."

On learning that officers had forcibly entered Alaa's house and physically assaulted his wife, I tweeted that I would not be arrested at my house. I did not want the officers harassing my family and terrorizing

my wife and children. I hugged my wife and told my kids that I would be traveling for work and that I might be gone for a while. My older daughter, Miral, who was six at the time, said nothing and just smiled at me—as if she saw through my lie that I had to leave for work, knowing my absence was not due to work. My son, Nidal, who was three, broke down in tears and begged me to stay home and not leave.

I went to a cafe in Cairo to secretly meet a friend. It was not long before the owner called my friend aside and said, "I know your friend is Ahmed Maher. You guys need to disappear from here." Someone in the cafe had called the police after seeing on television that I was wanted by the authorities. The owner did not want me to get arrested in his cafe. We quickly left his establishment.

I left Cairo and spent two days in hiding, during which time I prepared myself to voluntarily surrender to the police. I bought supplies for what I expected to be a short stint in prison and called human rights advocates and officials that I knew in the EU, US, and UN to ask for their support if I were arrested.

Three days after Alaa's arrest, on November 30, 2013, I showed up at the prosecutor general's office at Abdeen Court to fulfill the arrest warrant. I had declared online that I would be turning myself in this day to avoid the police bursting into my family home and trying to arrest me. I had arranged to meet my lawyer and close friends at the court. When I arrived at the building, I found hundreds of colleagues had gathered outside to stand in solidarity with me, carrying banners and chanting slogans against the Protest Law. Hundreds of protesters were also there chanting against me and calling me a traitor. When I stood amid this large crowd, I saw some unfamiliar faces inciting fights with both the demonstrators and police.

Walking up to the court, surrounded by my colleagues, I too was chanting, "Down with the Protest Law!" while press cameras were in my face. I gave impromptu interviews declaring that I was turning myself in for questioning per the arrest order. I also declared my opposition to the law and objected to the decision to arrest me.

Walking up the stairs to the court, I was surrounded by hundreds of people chanting and pushing. I was being led up the steps by my lawyer

when Mohamed Adel, a co-founder of the April 6 Movement, came and took my arm, steadying me as we walked. I then saw Ahmed Douma come to take my other arm. It was a surprise for me to see him there supporting me. He had been supportive of the events of June 30 leading to the military takeover, which I was against. We had recently faced off in the media. I leaned into Douma and whispered "thank you" in his ear. As we made it through all the commotion to get inside Abdeen Court, we found the door locked. We were forced to go back down through the crowd and enter the court through the side alley entrance. The pushing, shoving, and yelling was becoming more intense as we went down the stairs. Punches were being thrown at me. I was hit in the head, my eyeglasses smacked off. Douma and Adel were steadying me and taking punches of their own.

As we rounded the corner to the side street, we were met by a police line coming in our direction. It was a setup. We were trapped. I would spend so much time as an organizer avoiding the police kettling us. Behind me, the crowd was battling, and in front of me stood the police.

The situation in the surrounding streets had escalated into clashes. People were throwing chairs from the cafes nearby. It was absolute chaos. The police began using tear gas, birdshot, and rubber bullets. When I think about how the situation escalated and the many unfamiliar faces I saw, I reckon this riot was clearly incited, if not staged. People intentionally clashed with the police and provoked them to disrupt the demonstration. A few minutes later, someone opened the door to the court, and my lawyer and I rushed in, coughing from the tear gas filling our lungs.

Once inside, two prosecutors began to question me about the April 6 Movement, the Protest Law, and my opinions about the government. Although one of them seemed kind enough, the other one clearly despised me. He said frankly, "I hate you," and blamed me for losing relationships with some of his close friends and family who opposed the state and were members or supporters of the April 6 Movement. I was then taken to the Habz Khana (the "lockbox"), a holding cell where they would keep me until I could be transferred to prison. Despite being the only prisoner, a whole group of guards was stationed to keep a careful watch. Someone in the government was clearly terrified of unarmed people like me.

After a few hours had passed, I heard my name in chants outside the

court building and thought that my colleagues must have gathered to protest again. However, when the lorry came to transfer me to prison and we left the building, I realized the chants were against me and the revolution. A new group of protesters—the good citizens in the eyes of the police—had gathered in support of the government. These "good citizens," who came out to support the military and protest its opponents like me, were usually impoverished folks who in exchange for money and food would come out to disrupt protests and chant in favor of the government.

A woman I had seen "clashing" with the police a few hours earlier when I walked to Abdeen Court was now protesting freely without any police intervention. She was chanting, "Hopefully, the death penalty for you traitor. You want to destroy the police and the military."

When many opposition leaders and activists—including Wael Ghonim, Ayman Nour, El-Baradei—left the country, they advised me to do the same. I did not heed their advice. I was under the impression that they would not punish me harshly because I never took up arms against the regime or incited violence. I thought, rather naively, that I would not be in any prolonged danger because I submitted myself to the authorities voluntarily. In Mubarak and Morsi's time, imprisonment for protests lasted six months at most, and no member of the April 6 Movement had been imprisoned for longer. I handed myself to the police thinking I would spend two, maybe three, months in jail. Oh, I was wrong. So, so wrong.

Why Do You Hate Us?

After all these years, as memories become hazier, one mundane incident that happened soon after my arrest has stuck in my memory. It had been two days since my arrest, and I was held in Leyman Tora. Leyman Tora is an old prison where General Ahmed Orabi, former leader of the Egyptian army who fought against the British occupation, had been held. Because of the thin walls of our solitary confinement cells, we could still talk to and hear each other through them. It was my birthday, December 2, 2013. In the early hours of the morning, we heard a prison guard say, "Ahmed Maher is going to be released." Alaa asked him if he would also be released. We only heard, "No. Only Maher." Other prisoners congratulated me as I was taken out of my cell.

I had a bad feeling about this. I was taken to the Cairo Security Administration Building to process my release. Upon arrival, I met with an intelligence officer who offered me a deal: If I stopped criticizing the Protest Law and publicly spoke in its favor, they would consider releasing me. If I refused, I would stay in prison. I told them that I did not intend to support this law because it contradicted my own principles and those of the revolution. "O.K.," he said. "Now you are to be charged in another case with Adel and Douma."

While the police were cooking up a new arrest and detention order for me, an officer started to chat with me. Most conversations with intelligence officers are not all that memorable—it's all the same threats and insults. But this officer made our encounter notable when he asked me a question. "Why do you hate us?"

I thought about it. *Why indeed?* Maybe it was because the dungeons beneath my feet housed rooms to torture, electrocute, and beat up prisoners to force fake confessions out of them. Or perhaps because in the hallway between those dungeons lay a man—blindfolded, hands tied behind his back—on the bitter cold floor stained with his blood.

After having beaten "regime haters" nearly to death like this poor man on the floor, this officer had the gall to tell me, "Do not let criminals and liars poison your mind. Nobody has even touched these lads there. They fake feeling bad. We are the ones putting our lives on the line every day to defend the nation, sacrificing our lives for the sake of the Egyptian people."

As the officer's self-aggrandizing rant continued, another officer was on the phone with the Abdeen Intelligence and Security Division filing new charges against me. Yet another fabricated case. Yet another lie. They obtained a new detention order, and I spent that night at the Administration Police Building. The next day they took me to court. When I arrived and got out of the police lorry, I was attacked by a group of people gathered in support of the authorities. The officer escorting me said, "You hate the police, but without us, you would be killed."

And amid all this chest-thumping, feigned ignorance, and deliberate naivete, they ask us, *Why do you hate the police?*

I cannot deny we hate the brutality of the police. We hate their lies,

corruption, hypocrisies, and propaganda. Our hatred had been sowed, cultivated, and grown over many years of sustained abuse. When we went to Tahrir in 2011, the security apparatus called us Western spies. In 2005, when we asked for change, they explained that "the devil that we know [Mubarak] is better than a devil that we don't [political change]." And in 1977, they called students protesting a "revolution of criminals." Even going back to the British occupation, the domestic security forces and the political elites told ordinary Egyptians to "keep your heads out of politics. We are fine this way."

The police are armed. They have all the power and use their authority to carry out repression, humiliation, and torture against their own people. We did not hate every policeman and army officer, we hated the injustice perpetrated by the Ministry of Interior against the very civilians it had sworn to protect. During my time in prison, I met prison officers who saw us as humans and tried to help us. But mostly, they were there to get revenge on us or inflict more humiliation and punishment.

In our minds, we asked the security forces the same question. *Why do you hate us?*

It was more difficult for political prisoners to sneak in a piece of paper and pen than to smuggle drugs into a prison cell. The punishment for getting caught smuggling such staples was just as harsh, if not harsher. We were not allowed to read books, newspapers, and magazines. We could not easily communicate with other prisoners.

Case No. 9593 of 2013

After being informed that I had been added to a new criminal case, I was transferred back to Leyman Tora prison. This came as a shock to all the prisoners who, only a day earlier, congratulated me on my release. Upon my return, I told them what had happened and that I expected Douma and Adel to be arrested very soon.

A couple of hours later, we heard someone entering our cell. We all started cheering, "Welcome, Douma!" It was Ahmed Douma, now greeted by our cheers, jokes, and quips. Douma had been arrested at his house.

In the new lawsuit by the state, Mohamed Adel, Ahmed Douma, and I were charged with violating the Protest Law by organizing a protest

without prior notice, obstructing traffic, thuggery, sabotaging private property, and attacking central security force officers assigned to protect the premises of the Abdeen Courts Complex. The protests that these charges referred to were in fact the staged clashes in front of the Abdeen Court—most likely instigated by the security forces—when I turned myself in and people came out in considerable numbers in a show of support.

On December 9, following our first court proceedings, we were referred to the criminal court. Our trial began without Mohamed Adel, who had been hiding in plain sight working at an NGO until December 18, when authorities stormed those offices and arrested him. During the trial, seemingly incriminating videos of Mohamed Adel, who had been charged with inciting violence, were screened in which he was actually helping a police officer that suffered from the effects of tear gas. A photograph of me whispering "thank you" to Ahmed Douma was used during the trial to say, "Ahmed Maher is directing Ahmed Douma to create chaos." The trial was adjourned until December 22, when the verdict was expected. The prosecution asked for the maximum possible sentence. Our entire trial would not last more than 15 days. When the Interior Ministry and the prosecution work together, there is only one truth—the one they create—and we are left in a hopeless cycle of continuous detention. However, this did not mean we would stop our defiance.

According to the prison rules, while the trial was ongoing, we should have been given eight hours to move around the prison and go outside. We had also asked that they allow us to have a radio, books, papers, pen, and other things that were within our fundamental rights. They refused all our demands. We announced that we would begin a hunger strike. A few days into our strike, they conceded on most of our demands. They gave us more time outside, clothes, blankets, books, and newspapers, and they allowed our family to send us food.

I smuggled my first letter out of prison on December 18, 2013, written on a handkerchief and taken out by a visitor. I had asked for a pen from the people working in prison, who served us food and cleaned the place. All I could get was the inner refill of a pen, but this was enough. I started to write on tissues and on my white t-shirts. I hid this refill in my shoe and

shared it with Adel and Douma. When our trial restarted, we displayed the messages we wrote in the courtroom. We had written that we were still against the Protest Law.[2]

The police were outraged that we could get our message out to the public and that we could write the messages in the first place even though pens were banned for prisoners. The police searched my clothes for a pen and paper regularly, and they found messages I had written on tissues to give to lawyers. They warned me that sending any messages outside was illegal.

On December 22, 2013, the Abdeen Court issued a guilty verdict in Case No. 9593, sentencing us to three years in prison and a fine of 50,000 Egyptian pounds (the equivalent of $7,180). The trial had lasted less than twenty days, with authorities not even trying to maintain a pretense of judicial fairness.

We could not believe it. Three years. For what? We had expected three months or even hoped—rather optimistically—that we would be released on bail.

But the regime decided to use us. Since we were the first group of activists to be sentenced under the new Protest Law, the regime used our public profiles to issue the maximum punishment as a scare tactic and a warning to others.

We were shocked upon hearing the court decision. The initial shock turned quickly into verbal defiance when, upon hearing the verdict, we started chanting against the military rule, and the Protest Law.

When we were led out of the courtroom, I saw my mother crying. That was the most heartbreaking and emotionally demanding moment since my arrest. The weakest point for any prisoner is his family. His wife, his mother, his children—the people he is responsible for and who must endure the hardship of his imprisonment.

Our sentence of three years in prison included hard labor. That was scary for my family and friends. I could be sent away, and no one knew if we would live through the sentence.

On the way back to prison, we sat in silence for fifteen minutes, still in shock from the verdict. Douma started talking first. He shared that what shocked him most was the three years of surveillance after our three years

of jail time. I told him that I did not believe that we would serve three whole years. It was also unimaginable to me that they would surveil us and our families for another three years.

Reality Sets In

As the third anniversary of the revolution approached, many more of our friends and colleagues were arrested. By this time, they had moved the Muslim Brotherhood prisoners to the high-security Scorpion prison. Perhaps they did this to prevent them from communicating with other prisoners and organizing any resistance within the prison, to punish them more severely than other political inmates, or just as an arbitrary and illogical act—which would be in line with many of the regime's decisions.

The authorities wanted to send the message that the revolution was over. On January 25, 2014, we heard that supporters mobilized on the street in large droves to demonstrate their support for the new regime. Police and thugs were there to arrest or beat up any supporters of the revolution. I heard radio speeches targeting other revolutionaries and me and labeling anyone who opposed the regime as a terrorist. I went from being a symbol of the revolution to a prisoner in solitary confinement. I barely would have known what was happening outside had it not been for the radio. As new people were thrown into prison, we found out that many of our colleagues had been arrested and taken to different prisons. Some of our members had even been killed.

We immediately filed an appeal against our sentence. Hearings were set for January but were then delayed a month. Security officials cited heightened security efforts in preparation for Morsi's trial and postponed our hearings another month.

I continued to smuggle letters out of prison whenever I could. I wrote about new prisoners coming into the prisons every day who showed signs of torture and exhaustion. I continued to also hear from the new prisoners that many of our friends were being tortured in other prisons simply for being associated with April 6. The allegations of torture, unlawful arrests, and forced disappearances were piling up–creating even more distrust, hatred, and grievances among people who were simply expressing an opinion. On March 10, 2014, after I published a letter condemning the

authorities for potentially breeding terrorism and violence through their brutal behavior, we had an appeal hearing scheduled. When we were about to be transported, the police began pushing and shoving us. We were all handcuffed together, which caused us to lose balance. That was when punches and kicks were thrown our way. Douma and Adel took hard hits to their abdomens, arms, and backs. I was more fortunate this time because when they lost balance, they fell on me.

As we entered the court, we demanded that our lawyers withdraw from representing us until a team of forensic doctors was appointed to investigate our torture. No doctor was appointed, and the trial was adjourned to April 7.

Political prisoners in Egypt gradually lost all hope. In our early prison days, we would hear rumors that he would pardon us in prison. Every time rumors like this spread in prison, hope rose among prisoners and their families. But as no one was released and months went by, the reality set in—we would remain in our confinement. We stopped anticipating a hearing to reconsider our jail time. Our fate was sealed by the regime long before any court deliberations.

On May 5, 2014, I wrote the following in a smuggled letter from my solitary confinement in Tora prison:

> *In three years, I will be 36 years old; my daughter will be nine years old; my son, six years old.*
>
> *During these three years, I won't be with my daughter at her first year in school, nor the second, and perhaps the third.*
>
> *During these three years, I won't be with my son as he starts speaking in complete sentences or as he goes to kindergarten.*
>
> *During these three years in prison, how will I be able to provide for my family? This is an important question.*
>
> *The only job I have is as a civil engineer. Even months before my imprisonment, my paycheck was cut.*
>
> *Surely months differ from years.*
>
> *I don't have an inheritance. I have not prepared for this day. I have debts and payments and loans that will accumulate and double until I am released after three years.*
>
> *What to do?*

The one thing that never got easier, no matter how much acceptance of our situation any of us could muster, was the thought of our families. When I had left for prison, I had told both my kids that I was going away for work. When I would talk to them on the phone, I would say, "My boss wants me to stay a bit longer. I will come back in a few days." Miral, my daughter, knew I was in jail. She never told me that she knew, but she had seen the news and she knew I was lying to her when talking about my need to stay longer at work. My parents and my wife did not want to bring the kids to visit me in prison because they were too young to see me like that, in a prison uniform and surrounded by guards.

During my time in prison, my wife and kids were getting by on the insurance money I received from my car crash earlier in the year. The guilt of not providing for my family consumed me and many others in prison.

CHAPTER TEN

There is Always Light in the Darkest of Shadows

Living in solitary confinement for more than twenty hours every day can take an immense toll on a person's physical and mental health. The cell door would usually open between 8 and 10 am, and I would wake up early to make sure that I made full use of the short time to go outside—it was time I could not afford to lose.

When I was outside my cell, I would try to meet Mohamed Adel, Ahmed Douma, and Alaa Abdel Fattah to discuss the news and life in prison. We would organize football matches, play chess, and cook lunch together that we would eat later. Having visitors was our connection to the outside world and there would always be an exchange of gifts, and the prisoner would receive a lot of things like food, books, and clothes. We would send messages through people we knew to our families, and we would plan our visiting schedules such that we could receive fresh food as often as possible.

The doors of the cell would close quite early in the afternoon, after which time would slow down immeasurably. Since there were not many activities to do after the cell doors shut, we created a mechanism called "Al-Taweel"—a long wire to help us sneak things door to door. We used this system of wires and ropes to exchange smuggled food, radio, newspapers, and memory drives from one cell to another. During my time in solitary confinement, I read newspapers whenever I could get hold of

them, made coffee, cleaned, and just waited for the time to pass until the doors would open again the next morning.

I quickly realized if I did not spend some of those hours doing something productive, I would sink into a deep depression. So the engineering nerd in me started studying political science.* I also tried to write as much as possible. I wanted people outside the prison to hear my voice, but smuggling messages from within prison was not an easy task. I would usually spend a week studying the guards' schedule, when and where they searched for contraband, and which guard would be willing to help me out.

I was smuggling messages in and out of prison, including articles I wanted to have published but also private messages to my family and friends. I wrote on anything and everything I could find—napkins, toilet paper, tissue paper. Since the guards were always watching and trying to prevent me from writing, I took to the one place with the tiniest amount of privacy—the prison restroom. The more articles I smuggled out to get published, the more my cell was ransacked. Sometimes the prison guards found my letters and writings that I had hidden, and my cell was often left a complete mess from the guards' searches. Anything to write on was immediately taken away from me.

In June 2014, when I was in Tora prison, I wrote an op-ed for *The Washington Post* titled "What Really Happened to the Egyptian Revolution." It was a response to then Secretary of State John Kerry who had made a statement suggesting that the 2011 Revolution sparked by the youth was "stolen" by the Muslim Brotherhood. This not only shifted the blame for squandering democratic hopes away from the military but also suggested that the Brotherhood was the only real player in post-revolution Egypt. This trivialized the sacrifice of all the young people who were languishing in prison for defending human rights and democracy. In the op-ed, I criticized the military regime and the security services and bemoaned the direction the country was headed in. The Arabic version was published by *Mada Masr*, a news outlet that is widely read among Egyptians. The

* According to Egyptian law, imprisoned students are allowed to complete the work for their degrees, but there are many hoops to jump through to get the necessary approvals from prison administrators and university officials.



Dylan Jet's photo in April 6 T-shirt that Ahmed had on his prison cell wall.

authorities punished me once this article was published by launching an investigation into additional allegations of treason. In addition, our entire group (Alaa Abdel Fattah, Ahmed Douma, Mohamed Adel and myself) was subject to collective punishment, which was clearly done to intimidate and put more pressure on me and my cellmates.

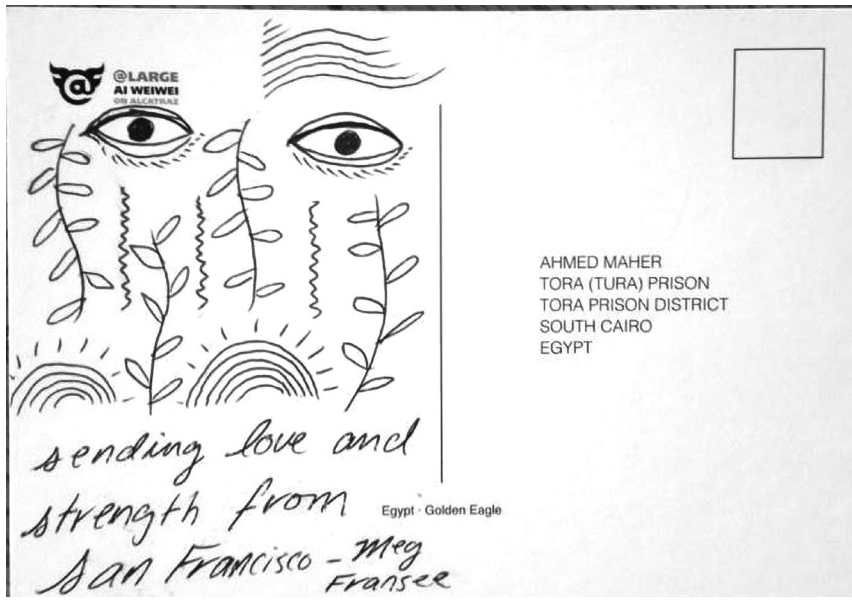
The next day, a large group of officers came to our cells and confiscated everything from us—books, pens, radio, and even toilet paper. All my friends remained steadfast in their support for me and in their willingness to pay the price for the dissent they considered essential. They did not waver in the face of the punishment because they believed strongly in the need to send a strong message to the West about the hypocrisy of Kerry's statement and continued to stand by me. After three weeks, as the emotions surrounding the op-ed cooled down, the prison authorities started to relent on the punishment. We negotiated with them, telling them that we would stop causing trouble, or threatening to begin another

hunger strike. Sometimes the authorities would be reactionary and as time went on, they would start to give back our things and other privileges previously afforded to us (newspapers, books, magazines, radio).

I covered the walls of my prison cell with photos of my family and friends and drawings my children had made me. Dylan, a young American I had met during my travels, wrote to me in a letter: "There is always a light in the darkest of shadows." He also sent me a picture of him wearing an April 6 t-shirt in which he was looking a lot like Jesus, with long hair and an unshaved beard (which I told him to shave). I showed his photo to the other prisoners and told them that Jesus was on our side. In one of my prison letters, I wrote: "We try to make jokes all the time in the prison :) How can we live without fun?" Another quote up on my wall was from the movie *The Book of Eli* that read: "I fought the good fight, I finished the race, I kept the faith." It was sent to me by Michelle, a close American friend who had helped coordinate my US visits and relentlessly advocated on my and others' behalf ever since.

I quit smoking in prison and became conscious about eating and living healthily. I was inspired by a fellow prisoner, Peter Greste, an Australian journalist. Alaa, Adel, and I welcomed Peter to sit with us because we spoke some English. Since we only had one hour in the morning to go outside, get sunlight, and meet people face-to-face, most of us wanted to spend this time talking with one another. On the other hand, Peter spent more than half of his free time running and exercising. He spoke in-depth to me about the importance of living a healthy lifestyle, advice that I took and implemented almost immediately.

I developed a profound friendship in prison with a 77-year-old British man I met in 2016 named Charles Ferndale.[1] Charles was arrested before the 2011 revolution and was serving a life sentence on drug-related charges after someone placed hashish on his yacht and informed the Egyptian police. The day Charles was moved into our block, he came up to me and gave me a big hug, telling me that he knew me from the news he was receiving about the revolution. I shared my meals with Charles, who was otherwise very lonely. The British ambassador was the only person who visited and talked to him in prison every two months. Charles had worked as a journalist when he was younger and had hundreds of books in his



Ai Weiwei postcards following his Alcatraz installation for prisoners of conscience.

prison cell. Every time we saw each other, he came to me with books in hand, fully prepared to have an in-depth discussion on why I "needed" to read this particular stack of books and what they would tell me about the world.

One of the books Charles gave me was an Arabic–English dictionary from the 1800s. Soon after, my letters to friends were filled with terms like poppycock, fiddlesticks, and Johnny rot. In response to one of many EU resolutions condemning the human rights violations in Egypt, I wrote back to my friends that it was "balderdash!" Every evening Charles would write me a letter that he would hand to me the next morning when doors opened, and I would read them out loud. In these letters, Charles discussed his ideas of utopia, perspectives on politics, thoughts on contemporary issues, and general rants about life. These letters were also a great way for me to improve my language. Each letter always came with at least three book recommendations.

One day I got a message that a great Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei had done an installation at Alcatraz prison featuring historic prisoners of conscience. Ai Weiwei had been detained by the Chinese authorities in



Obama calls for Ahmed's release, Clinton Global Initiative, Sept 23, 2014.

April 2011 because his government feared the wave of people-powered risings would arrive there as well. Alaa, Douma, and I were featured in it and our images were made of Legos. The Legos resembled a pixelated photo of our faces (which strangely made sense). When I was young, I would spend hours building new cities and worlds out of Legos. I was told in the letter that more than five thousand people a day were seeing the exhibit, hearing our stories, and writing postcards that were mailed to our prison. I had not received any postcards, but I laughed aloud at the thought of the prison guards receiving and going through hundreds of postcards addressed to us in solidarity. I conveyed back how grateful Alaa, Douma, and I were for the efforts of Ai Weiwei and the people visiting the exhibit and did not omit to mention the fact that we were unfortunately prevented from receiving postcards. Weeks later, I received a smuggled letter with messages from visitors at the exhibit from around the world. Children, adults, strangers—all expressed their solidarity, support, and affinity with our fate.

These uplifting messages arrived while I was going through a tough time mentally. The prison guards would often tell us that "no one cared about us" and that "we were forgotten and would die in our cells." Some days it was difficult not to believe them. But these messages lit our hope

anew. I also received messages telling me about all the efforts others were making on my behalf. Professor Noam Chomsky made a video calling for my release on April 6, 2014, the anniversary of our movement. United Nations and European Union leaders were also calling for our release. The US State Department was issuing statements of "concern." And my friends around the world got together and wrote a letter to President Obama and the United Nations secretary-general, Ban Ki-moon, calling for my and other Egyptian prisoners' release. They approached many people that I had known over the years to join them and sign the letter—from NGOs to activists and journalists. Italian artist Gianluca Constantini drew my image, and American actor Holt McCallany used his celebrity status to advocate on my behalf. Among other efforts, he visited the Egyptian Embassy in New York with an artist who drew my portrait along with the words "Free Ahmed Maher" on the embassy's doorsteps while the United Nations General Assembly was in session. I am not fully aware of all the efforts people made on our behalf before and after our sentencing, but I will forever remain profoundly grateful and humbled by the amount of support we received.

Last Year in Prison

Ahmed Douma was transferred to a different prison in May 2014. Douma had fallen gravely ill, and after a lot of pressure (both inside and outside the prison), they finally transferred him. When Douma had gone on hunger strike, an infection in his intestine had grown worse, and he had been in a lot of pain–unable to eat or drink anything at all. Over the summer, other prisoners such as Mohamed Adel were transferred, breaking up the majority of political prisoners in the same prison.

Separating us was used as a tactic to prevent further organizing in prison or "colluding" with one another. We had long been referred to, in the press and more broadly by different governments, as the "Egypt 3" and separating us was yet another way for the Egyptian regime to torment us psychologically and crush our spirit of solidarity.

In the place of my friends, military officers who had been charged with drug offenses and corruption charges were moved in, and I was now the only political prisoner in that complex. The only conversation between

the officers and me was about food and television. The jailed officers were somehow a more privileged class of prisoners than arrested political dissidents and were allowed to bring along TV sets when they arrived at the complex, no doubt increasing the value of this splendid establishment. The police officers had also brought in a satellite dish and receiver which had a USB port and memory card socket on the back which allowed us to play our own movies on different TV sets that were now around the prison complex.

One day, unbeknownst to me, one of the jailed officers had Holt's movie *Bullet to the Head* on his flash drive and put it on. When Holt came on the tv, I almost fainted. I told him, "That's my friend Holt!" In my mind, I felt this was a sign from God that my friends were on the outside fighting for me. He asked me *how come such important people are advocating for you, and you are still in prison?* When other prisoners entered the area, I immediately changed the channel as I did not want this news to reach the authorities and cause any more trouble.

I went on to become friends with one of the (now former cop) prisoners, Amr, who spoke both French and English. We would share our food and talk about life. Charles, my old British friend who remained in the same complex prison with me, was concerned with taking care of his beloved cats. Charles used to spend all the money that the British embassy sent him on feeding the cats in the prison compound. Growing up, I was never too fond of animals. As a kid, I never had a pet, and the animals I interacted with had only been feral street dogs and cats. I had never even touched or played with a dog until I traveled to the US. In America, my friends' dogs were part of their family, and it was the first time I felt comfortable sharing a space with animals. When I got to prison, my love for animals was sealed. In our complex, there were a lot of cats who would come and sit around us whenever we sat to eat breakfast or lunch. One of the cats, Kimo, was friendly and considered himself to be the king of the complex. He was very well known among the guards and prisoners. Everyone would feed him constantly. If you said his name, he would show up pretty quickly for food. He was a pet cat who had been left by his owners in the prison and he could not hunt or fight with other cats for food. When one of the kittens passed away,

and we buried her, Charles could not stop crying for hours.

Not having grown up with pets, my encounters with animals had been relegated only to street animals, which were often covered in fleas and were sickly. Charles was caring for his cats as I had for my kids–their feeding took priority over his own, he would stroke their backs and speak to them in a soft gentle voice. Prison is a place so devoid of love and gratitude that I quickly found myself mimicking Charles' behavior with the cats—reaching out to pet them, asking if I could feed them, and smiling whenever I saw them approach with their meows. Through this experience of unconditional love for animals, I learned a lot and decided then that when I got out of prison, I would get a cat. As for Amr, I have met him several times since we both were released and we both laugh at the unlikely friendship that has formed between us.

The interest of various NGOs, governments, and politicians in our case had gone from outrage about the human rights situation in Egypt to silence over the years. I continued to receive messages from friends, friends of friends, and supporters I didn't know while in prison. I received messages from Brad Rowe, a lecturer in public policy, whom I had met at the University of California, Los Angeles in 2012. We became close friends, and before I returned to Egypt in 2012, I had asked Brad if he would "make some noise" in case I get arrested under Morsi, and he had said to me "of course, my brother." During my time in prison, Brad sent me letters telling me that he was praying for me. He would include these prayers in his letters encouraging me to keep the faith. For me, it was the first time I had a Christian praying directly for me, and it touched me deeply.

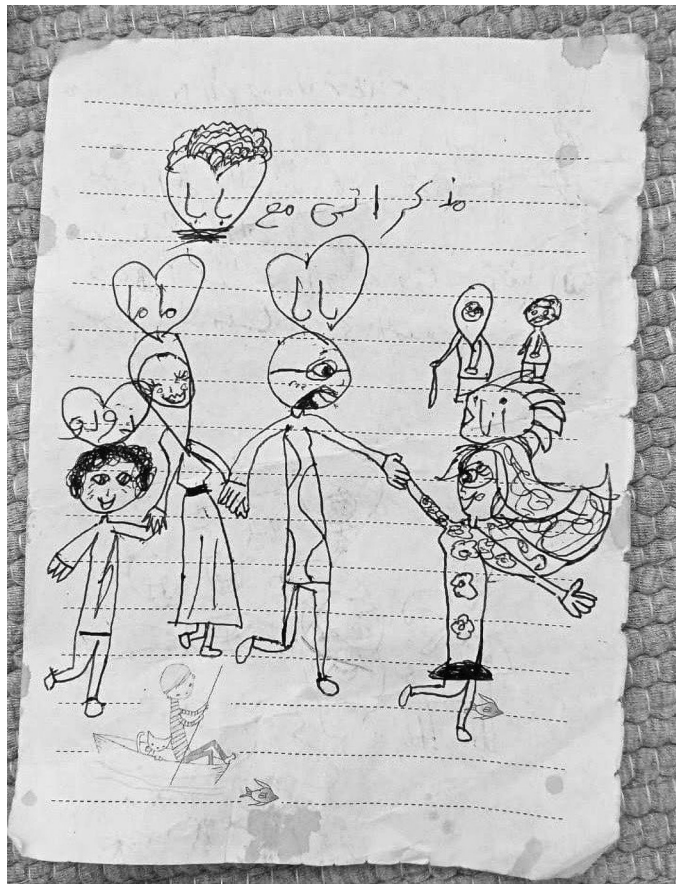
Another message came from a friend of Brad and Michelle's, Miki Woodard. She told me the story of her grandfather (Teddy) who was a Tuskegee airman belonging to the group of African American military pilots who fought in the second world war. Teddy had been mission trained in the racist south at a time when lynchings were legal. Miki reflected on his experience of flying in a time and a country where he was not even recognized fully as a human, and what must have given him the confidence to do so. This is a struggle that African Americans are still engaged in today, and I was aware of the Black Lives Matter movement

that sprang to prominence after the police killing of George Floyd. I could see our own struggle mirrored in the struggle of African Americans through the system of oppression in Egypt.

The thought that my imprisonment had consumed so many people's lives weighed heavily on me. I tried to stay connected with my friends and family. Having quit smoking, I even suggested to my dear American friend Michelle that she should quit as well. My brother Mostafa wanted to get married but he said that he would wait until I was released from prison. Since imprisonment comes with a lot of uncertainty about the future, and I really did not want him to wait, I urged him to get married even though I could not attend his wedding. I was watching my children grow up while I was in prison, and this was extremely hard on me. I went from being an active part of my family's daily life, where I contributed meaningfully, to becoming an immense burden to them.

It pained me day and night having to be away from my children. I had told them that my job was now inside the prison and I couldn't leave to go home. They would often cry and beg me to quit my "new job" so I could be at home with them. It was heartbreaking. Every time my kids came to visit, I would give them a gift to strengthen my connection with them. There was a kind, older guard who agreed to bring me comics for my kids: "Disney Princesses" for Miral, and "Winnie the Pooh" for Nidal. I would read them first and then would talk with my kids during the next visit about the comics stories they read. On Miral's and Nidal's birthdays, I appealed to the manager of the prison to allow me to buy a guitar for my daughter and a violin for my son and I was able to give them these gifts during their visit. I baked a cake for their birthdays and they walked out of the prison building smiling with the instruments in their hands. I tried to prepare for each of my family's visits to compensate for all that I had missed with them.

In addition to the concerns about my children and my wife and not having an income, there was another thing that consumed me during my time in prison. In 2011, my mother underwent surgery and chemotherapy to treat cancer. Her cancer fortunately went into remission after that. During my first month in prison, I had a dream about my mother and I woke up worried. That week, she missed her prison visit and I did not



A drawing of the Maher family from Ahmed's daughter, Miral, during his time at his "new job" in prison.

hear anything about her. On the next visit, she told me that the cancer had come back and that it was the end. I told her we needed to try chemotherapy again; after all, science had made progress in the past few years. Unfortunately, her cancer returned with even greater maliciousness. I spoke to my brother Mostafa and a lot of my friends to help my mother get into therapy and manage her transportation.

She had spent her time worrying about me while the doctor was telling her to avoid stress. My power was taken away from me as a revolutionary, as an Egyptian, and as a father. But the most desponding failure was that of the son who was unable to be there for his mother.

On Asphalt

I was told in prison that three years was a gift–that I should consider myself lucky for such a lenient sentence for calling the July 2013 military takeover a coup during my talk at the Middle East Institute annual conference in the United States. When we were first handed our sentences of three years in prison followed by three years of constant surveillance, Ahmed Douma had said that he was much more concerned about the surveillance. At the time, I had thought that surveillance would not be enforced because it was usually only used in the case of theft or other violent crimes.

Three months before my release, I started to take this more seriously and asked many of my cellmates about what life outside prison under constant police monitoring would mean. Many of the former police officers who I shared a cell with said that it might be possible that this decision is overturned or neglected. They suggested that bribes might be another way to get around it. I hadn't spent the past 20 years of my life fighting corruption to then try and bribe my way out of the surveillance sentence and hand authorities a reason to arrest me on bribery charges.

I was also very concerned about whether or not the military would even decide to release me. They could change their mind and put me on yet another trial. Leaving prison is never guaranteed. One month before my expected release, I started to think about what might convince the Minister of Interior to overturn or ignore my surveillance sentence. However, the regime was not known for its fondness for me, so I knew my chances of getting out of this nightmare were slim.

As my date of release approached, the prison authorities treated me well, frequently encouraging me to share stories and memories from prison in a positive light when I am released. They assured me that I wouldn't be rearrested over the underwear case and congratulated me on my imminent release.

On January 5, 2017, I was released from prison.

They took me in a van from the prison (Tora Leyman) to El-Khalifa police station in old Cairo to process my release papers. In Egypt, prisoners are usually released from the station closest to their place of residence,

and so I had to establish my own house (and not my parent's house which is what was in the official books) as residence to be able to report for surveillance in a police station close to where I live. My brother Mostafa had come to the police station because he had heard that I was to be released, but when he asked about me, he was told I was not there. He followed a police truck that left from there suspecting I was in it, just to make sure I didn't disappear since it is common for prisoners to disappear in the process of being moved by the police. I was taken to the Abdeen police station to finish some paperwork dating back to the underwear protest case from March 2013, but was told to go to another police station. I then went to the Nasr City police station to make sure that this past case would not give them a pretext to re-arrest me. I was still inside my cell when I finally saw Mostafa.

My release coincided with President Obama's last days in office, and a journalist highlighted my case during a State Department briefing, asking spokesperson John Kirby in his last briefing if the US government would raise my case with the Egyptian government if I were not released. I was told by the officers that they wanted to accelerate my surveillance filing because my case was garnering a lot of media attention and various people started showing up outside the police station.

They asked me to give them information about my friends and the places I had visited. I gave them sarcastic answers because, of course, they knew all the answers already. Finally, I was taken to the Katameya police station in New Cairo from where I was released and where I would be expected to report for surveillance. The process of release took four days in total, which to be honest, was not that bad in comparison to my other colleagues for whom it took weeks.

After being officially released, I got a lot of calls from journalists but I refused to say anything because I knew it would be better for me and those close to me if I stayed out of the media spotlight, at least for now. At 5:30 pm the next day, I reported to the police station. During my first five days of surveillance, I sat in a corridor that was in between different jail cells. They could not put me in a jail cell because that would not be legal, and they did not put me in the surveillance room because they did not want me interacting with any other prisoners. I could not exit this

corridor without getting permission from the officer in charge. So to go to the toilet, a policeman would come and escort me and then bring me back. It was incredibly cold and I could not sleep because of the constant commotion of prisoners being brought through this corridor.

In the early days of surveillance, my brother and other friends would come early in the morning to wake up the officers to let me out at 6 am. During the month of Ramadan, they would come at the time to break the fast. I complained a lot about the conditions of my surveillance and the head of the police station told me that if I stopped trying to organize public pressure—which I frankly didn't do—I would get a room. When I continued to complain about the conditions of my surveillance, they put me into a storage closet underneath the stairs. I carried books, a blanket, a pillow, a lamp, and a chair to situate myself in the confined space of the closet and got strange looks from new prisoners and police officers coming in. I think the scene was bizarre for everyone involved. I was the unwelcome house guest for both the police and the prisoners. The head of the police station ordered officers to put cameras inside and outside of the space I was in, and I was not allowed to go outside. I still had to ask the guards to let me go to the bathroom or the cafeteria. This was overall a very weird experience. There were established protocols for other prisoners on surveillance and they were all put together in one room and made to use a bucket to pee in. However, since I was a political prisoner, they did not know exactly how to deal with me.

This was the first time surveillance was used to police a political prisoner. And now the regime has deployed it with greater regularity against political prisoners. Does it serve any purpose other than making life outside of prison akin to confinement but without officially calling it imprisonment?

Every day at 5pm, I would get ready to report to the police station as part of my surveillance sentence with my blanket and books in hand. My days were incredibly busy because of the limited time I had before I needed to head down to my night jail in the form of a storage closet underneath the stairs at the police station. My mother had grown very weak over the years and many times I was running late and had to leave during her chemo sessions. Chemotherapy had made her very sick. She

was very weak and could not eat. Anything she did eat she could not keep down. This was making her even weaker. The medications which would help her severe nausea was not available at any of the pharmacies in Egypt. Our American friends got a prescription for the needed medicines and I had them continuously refilled and brought to Egypt by various means. Gradually, to our great relief, she was able to eat food again and not feel so weak and ill.

I called the Center for Human Rights and many other lawyers to help assess my options. Initially, I thought the regime would enforce my surveillance for maybe a few days or a month, after which the regime administrators would no longer be that concerned. However, the police were rigid or perhaps too enthusiastic in applying the oppressive law. Many lawyers, activists, and even parliament members called on my behalf to convince the authorities that I was not a criminal, and that surveillance law should not be applied to me. After a lot of negotiations between me and the chief at the station, they agreed to let me spend three days of the week at home and three days at the police station. They also allowed me to bring a phone and a computer without a camera as part of my surveillance regime which I thought was a good deal given the circumstances. This also gave me time to attend lectures at Cairo University to obtain a political science diploma.

The arrangement did not even last two months. They rescinded the stay-at-home agreement because some posts on the April 6 Facebook page were critical of the authorities. The spring of 2017 marked a breaking point in my relations with the police. One day in May 2017, after I took care of my mother during the month of Ramadan, I arrived for surveillance 15 minutes late, and the authorities filed an official complaint against me, accusing me of intentionally skipping my surveillance regime. They were simply trying to find a way to put me back in a cell with other prisoners. I was then taken to a prosecutor who released me, but following this incident, I started to criticize the police. This was just met with harsher punishments including moving me to extremely overcrowded rooms. These rooms were filled with heavy smokers and had no ventilation, which began to affect my health. The police also no longer allowed me to have a phone or a laptop with me.

Each surveillance cell was shared by 10-13 people, and life in surveillance was described as miserable, essentially consisting of menial chores around the police station all day, akin to living like slaves. One day, a police officer came in and ordered us to mop the floors and clean the courtyard. I simply told him "No. This is your job, not mine." A few of the prisoners who had initially agreed to do the chores also sat back down in agreement with me. There was one small window in the room, and we would sleep on the cement floor. During the summer, it would get unbearably hot, and in the winter, we would be cold and damp.

Surveillance became another form of semi-imprisonment. I could experience the world firsthand for brief moments instead of reading about it in a newspaper, but by the end of the day, I was forced to retreat behind the walls of the police station. I would then re-emerge from the dungeons of oppression, and hasten to taste freedom again at dawn. And then this will repeat again. I could not see the end of this vicious circle.

During my three years in prison, I missed out on many important events in my life. Small things like birds and the sky had become incredibly important to me, and I was always thinking of the outside world. Leaving prison was supposed to give me freedom. With the surveillance firmly in place, the regime ensured that it still kept half of my life in a prison-like state.

On May 19, 2019, authorities arrested my brother Mostafa after raiding his house. He disappeared for two days and was brought before the State Security Prosecutor who charged him with "suspicion of intent" and detained him on remand. The authorities said that Mostafa was arrested under suspicion of intending to demonstrate at upcoming football matches in the Africa Cup of Nations. When questioned, he kept telling the authorities that he was the one man in Egypt who did not follow sports and had no plans of criticizing the government or participating in a protest. Two days later he was transferred to Tora prison where he was held in solitary confinement and was allowed no visitors except his immediate relatives. Mostafa stayed in prison for ten months during which time a lot of people who had advocated for me during my time in prison (Noam Chomsky, Michelle, Holt, Brad) embarked on similar advocacy on his behalf. He was finally released on March 20, 2020.

Surveillance at an End

Every evening as I arrived at the police station as part of my surveillance, I was greeted by a feral dog that I named Mishu. Mishu would wait for me until the following morning outside the police station and would walk me back to my car. For three years, this stray dog, at first timid towards me, would greet me with a wagging tail. I began bringing Mishu food and water and petting him as we walked together to and from the police station. His presence at the jail, the only consistent kindness on the block, made me truly understand the value of companionship between man and dog. After three years, as my time in surveillance was coming to a close, Mishu began looking sick. Very thin with sunken eyes. I brought him water and asked around about medicine I could get for him. Feral animals in Egypt are often poisoned, whether intentionally or not, and I feared this was the cause of Mishu's sickness. I found out that someone had poisoned Mishu because he was digging around in the gardens, and to stop him, they placed rat poison that he must have eaten. There was nothing I could do, and on one of my final days under surveillance, as I left the police station in the morning, Mishu wasn't there.

My last day in surveillance was on January 2, 2020—after which I was finally a free man. In my opinion, the officers in the police station presented themselves as a lot less kindly, were less open to negotiation, and were often more aggressive than the officers in the prison. But they refrained from using insults and abuses with me as they had with other prisoners in surveillance.

I suffered from depression while in prison. These bouts of depression continued throughout the three years of my surveillance sentence as well. Exercising and being healthy were good for me physically, but mentally, I was struggling. I began seeing a therapist upon my release to help me gain perspective and some tools for understanding how I was feeling. A lot of other former prisoners had posted on Facebook about seeking therapy and dealing with depression. Was my depression situational or had chemicals gone awry in my brain? I feared not being able to provide for my family financially; the aspirations of 2011 left me feeling like a failure and my mother's declining health left me devastated.

Taking my children to the sports club has always been one of my

favorite ways to spend time with them. My daughter Meral was taking swimming lessons in July 2019. As she dove into the water, I noticed a large hump on her shoulder. We made an appointment with the doctor right away and her X-rays revealed a critical case of scoliosis. Her spine was bent like a snake under her shoulder and was pushing on her lungs. If left unfixed, not only would she be unable to stand up straight but it could also impede her breathing, and thus be fatal.

I sent the X-rays to a friend at Sant'Egidio in Italy, a Rome-based community started in 1968 by a group of high school students, the Comunità di Sant'Egidio, which works to help people in the poorest neighborhoods of Rome, and to bring people together for a more peaceful world. In both 2012 and 2013, I was invited to speak on panels at a two-day peace conference hosted by St. Egidio in Rome, during which time I was able to visit hospitals for children and the impoverished. I reached out to people I knew at Sant'Egidio about Meral's spine, and within a few months, Meral and my wife were on their way to Rome to see a specialist at the Bambino Hospital which is overseen by the Holy See. The doctors there scheduled Meral to return in four months for spinal surgery.

My mother had grown incredibly weak because of chemotherapy. In January of 2020, she had a fall which caused bleeding in her brain. She was rushed to the hospital where they had to put her in a medically induced coma. It felt like a point of absolute desperation for me. A few years back, Holt had sent me a message when I was on hunger strike in 2013 with a note saying: "My mom is 90 years old, and when she dies, I will have no more relatives. Please quit your hunger strike, my brother." His words deeply affected me and ultimately influenced my decision to quit the hunger strike. Holt's mother passed away in April 2015 at the age of 90. His mother, Julie Wilson, was widely regarded as the queen of cabaret and had dazzled Broadway throughout her career as a singer and actress. When I learned about this, I was overwhelmed with sadness for my friend, and fear when I thought about my own mother. At the time, I was banned from having any writing materials and could not send Holt a message of condolence. I spent the next week asking guards and other prisoners for favors until I was handed a small piece of tissue paper and a pen to write him a note. It was very important to me that Holt knew how sorry I was for his loss.

As I sat by my own mother's bedside, I repeated the words that Holt had said a few years ago to his mother on her ninetieth birthday. While I was in prison, he had sent me an audio of himself singing to his mother in Paris. In between songs, he is describing her career highlights, and the two of them have this banter about her hair! Holt's mother wore a signature gardenia flower in her hair, and on that day, they had given her a fake flower to wear for a photo shoot. She complained about it being fake, and Holt said to her "You're beautiful. You're always going to be beautiful to me." As I sat by my mother's hospital bed, the words that came out of my mouth were "You're always beautiful to me." My mother passed away on February 1, 2020.

No one will ever love you the way a mother does. My mother's unconditional love, her value of education, and the safe home she made for us growing up in a turbulent world is what I aspire to provide for my children. For me, my mother was the light in the darkness, and I knew my life would be bleaker now that she was not part of it anymore. My parents had been married for 40 years when my mother passed away. Her absence left an indelible void in our family, one that my father carried in quiet endurance as his own health slowly declined. On June 17, 2024, I went to my parents' home and found my father lying unconscious on the floor. We rushed him to the hospital, where he was in the Intensive Care Unit for three days before he passed away.

My father played a major role in shaping my interest in public affairs and politics.

Ever since I was young, he openly expressed views opposing Mubarak and his style of governance. He nurtured my love for reading newspapers and opinion pieces from an early age.

When I became involved in political activism, he encouraged me greatly, despite his fear that I might be imprisoned.

He would speak about me with immense pride in front of relatives and family friends, and his loss felt like a rupture in the fabric of my existence. Once more, the foundations of my world gave way. In the weeks that followed, I was overcome by a profound stillness—an ache threaded with doubt—wondering if my presence a moment sooner might have altered what had already been written.

EPILOGUE

What the Revolution Transformed

The revolution's impact reached beyond individual lives, extending its influence on both Egyptian society and the global stage. Prior to the 2011 revolution, my world was confined to the Middle East. This wasn't an issue as I love my country, its rich heritage, and its people. Egypt's diverse cultural tapestry, shaped by various historical, linguistic, and social forces, made it unique. However, the revolution became a pivotal point of expansion for me. As I embarked on journeys and shared insights about the revolution across panels and universities in countries like Poland, Korea, the Czech Republic, India, the United Kingdom, Italy, and the United States, my horizons broadened. Engaging with activists from various corners, including Grifna in Sudan, UnCutUK, and Occupy Wall Street, enriched my perspective. Through these travels, friendships blossomed, some leading to visits to Egypt and the forging of new bonds. Profoundly inspiring figures, such as Noam Chomsky, Lech Walesa, the Dalai Lama, and the Catholic Pope, left an indelible mark on me. Many of these acquaintances transformed into steadfast friends who supported me during my time in prison and since.

Shifting Perspectives and Empowered Identities

Post 9/11, Muslims, particularly men, often bore the burden of a Western stereotype casting us as potential terrorists. The revolutions of 2011 redefined this narrative. Men once labeled as potential threats were now recognized as "protesters, pro-democracy advocates, and human rights



Occupy Wall Street.
Photo by Dylan Jet.

champions." The strength of our women, too, was showcased proudly as they were shown to be independent, strong, and intelligent, with or without a hijab. While the achieved victories were fleeting, they symbolized the triumph of the underdog, like David against Goliath. Yet, beneath it all, we remained fundamentally human. We lost friends, family and loved ones both to life and to the violence we encountered.

Collaborating with Al-Azhar

In 2011, the post-revolution period saw meetings with activists like myself and Al-Azhar's Imam. Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayyeb, who oversaw Al-Azhar University and served as Sheikh-al-Azhar, was supportive of our cause, harboring concerns about radical elements taking control. Al-Azhar and the Vatican jointly bridged the gap between Islam and Christianity, inviting me to participate in discussions on Egyptian youth and the revolution. Strengthening ties between these institutions, underscored by Pope Francis, was evident in their collaborative efforts. My trips to Rome were organized by the Community of Sant'Egidio, which focuses on peace and providing for the poor. These trips, marked by moments like multi-faith

prayers at the Vatican, visits to residential homes for dementia patients where I met Christian, Muslim and Jewish elderly people all being cared for with compassion, truly deepened my understanding of shared humanitarian endeavors.

In 2020, my focus shifted to ensuring my daughter Meral's well-being. Diagnosed with severe scoliosis, I sought the most top-tier medical assistance available. St. Egidio, in partnership with the Vatican, facilitated her treatment in Rome's Bambino Hospital. Over four months, as she recuperated, my gratitude to these institutions grew immeasurable. Their support mended my daughter so she could lead a healthy life, and for that I will be eternally grateful.

Climate Justice as Human Rights

Before my imprisonment, I had already built a professional foundation: a degree in project management and certifications in community leadership and strategic planning. At first, I considered pursuing advanced studies in engineering, but prison imposed practical limits that made such ambitions unrealistic—engineering depends on laboratories, experimentation, and direct application to the material world, none of which was possible within the confines of a prison cell.

Instead, I turned to political science, a field in which I already had lived experience through years of activism, organizing, and engagement with social movements. I immersed myself in human rights theory, civil society, and later the study of nongovernmental organization (NGO) management. What began as a means of surviving imprisonment gradually became a deeper intellectual journey.

After my release, I formalized these studies through postgraduate work and later pursued a master's degree in international politics. This discipline proved essential to understanding the evolving structure of global power, the relationships between states and societies, and the growing crises shaping our world.

Among these crises, climate change was impossible to ignore.

My engagement with environmental and climate issues was not a departure from the struggle for rights and justice but an extension of it. The climate crisis is no longer an abstract environmental issue reserved for

scientific conferences or international summits; it has become a political, economic, and social crisis that directly affects the daily lives of millions of Egyptians.

As with many forms of injustice, the burdens of climate change fall most heavily on the poor and vulnerable. Farmers confronting drought and soil degradation, fishing communities facing declining livelihoods, and residents of impoverished urban neighborhoods suffering from pollution and failing infrastructure all bear the consequences disproportionately. This reality makes climate justice central to any meaningful discussion of the future.

The issue is not simply carbon emissions or renewable energy; it is also about power, participation, and inequality. Who bears the cost of adaptation? Who benefits from development projects? And who is allowed a voice in the decisions that shape the future of entire communities?

Egypt, like much of the Global South, contributed little to the historical causes of climate change yet faces some of its gravest consequences. The Nile Delta is considered one of the regions most vulnerable to rising sea levels, threatening agricultural production, water security, and the displacement of millions of people. What is at stake is not only the environment but social stability itself.

Yet the climate crisis is also a crisis of governance. Environmental policies are often designed in isolation from the public and framed as technical matters rather than as issues connected to justice and human dignity. In reality, environmental policy cannot be separated from questions of transparency, participation, and human rights. Citizens must not only endure the consequences of these decisions; they must also have the right to participate in shaping them.

For this reason, I became involved in initiatives focused on environmental advocacy and climate awareness. Our efforts seek to bridge the divide between environmental discourse and the lived realities of ordinary citizens. Too often, environmental issues are presented as concerns of elites, disconnected from the struggles of working people. In truth, the right to a safe and healthy environment is inseparable from the rights to food, health, housing, labor, and life itself.

Our approach emphasizes the relationship between law, climate policy,

and socioeconomic rights. We seek to create spaces for collaboration among researchers, environmental advocates, local communities, and young activists in order to move beyond symbolic discussion toward practical engagement with issues such as water security, energy policy, urban planning, and public infrastructure.

I have come to believe that the defining struggles of the coming decades will concern not political power alone but also the fundamental human right to clean air, clean water, food security, and safe land. Climate action, therefore, is not separate from the struggle for freedom and dignity—it is one of its clearest modern expressions.

The central question remains the same as it was during earlier battles for justice: who will bear the cost of crisis, and how can societies build a future that is more just, equitable, and humane?

The Long Arc of Justice

Reflecting on democracy, global solidarity, and change emerging from prison, and amid rising right-wing populism worldwide, I confronted narratives suggesting Arabs weren't fit for democracy. Advocacy for human rights sometimes took a back seat to "strategic" decisions by those in power. Presidential transitions, from Obama to Trump, influenced the global activism landscape. Amid these challenges, my paramount goal is ensuring that my children receive quality education, allowing them to discern beyond state-propagated narratives.

While forming the April 6 Movement, I drew inspiration from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement, and I studied their progress and setbacks. Recently, I have been watching Dr. King's 1967 interview where he reflects on progress, commitment, and nonviolence. This framework helps me understand where we, the Egyptians who rose up in 2011, stand today.

My analysis of both Dr. King's reflections a decade into the Civil Rights Movement and the aftermath of Egypt's 2011 uprising against Mubarak reveals striking parallels that span distinct contexts:

1. **Initial Expectations:** Dr. King's assessment of progress a decade later demonstrated disappointment and frustration due to unmet

aspirations. Similarly, Egypt's 2011 uprising began with high hopes for reform and a more democratic society post-Mubarak, mirroring the optimism of the Civil Rights era.

2. **Unfulfilled Promises:** Dr. King observed lingering inequalities despite legal advancements and desegregation, leaving promises unrealized. Similarly, after Mubarak's fall, Egypt faced unfulfilled promises of change and democracy. The limited reforms led to disillusionment among the population.
3. **Slow Change:** Dr. King noted the gradual nature of change over a decade, emphasizing the need for persistence and patience. Likewise, Egypt's transition to democracy was a slow process marked by political turmoil and economic challenges, resulting in a sense of stagnation.
4. **Continuing Struggles:** Dr. King emphasized the persistent nature of the civil rights struggle, advocating ongoing activism to address deeply rooted societal issues. Similarly, Egyptians continued protesting and advocating for lasting change in governance and justice beyond the initial uprising.
5. **Global Impact:** Dr. King's nonviolent principles inspired justice movements worldwide, influencing human rights battles. Similarly, Egypt's 2011 uprising had a global impact, triggering the "Arab Spring" movement across the Middle East and beyond.

Despite the differences in historical and cultural contexts, these shared themes of dashed hopes, gradual progress, persistent struggles, and the inspirational power of movements underscore the universal nature of the human condition.

The revolution's impact reached far beyond what I could have imagined. It expanded my horizons and connected me with activists and thinkers from around the world. It showed me that the fight for democracy and human rights is a universal struggle, one that transcends borders and cultures.

Through the years, I've seen perspectives shift, identities empowered, and collaborations forged with unlikely allies. In the end, this monograph is not just my story; it's a story shared by Egyptians and activists

around the world who fight for the right to think and the right to express themselves.

To my mother, who taught me to be a normal person but witnessed my journey into activism, and to all the mothers who fear for their children's safety but support their dreams, this monograph is dedicated. May our stories inspire future generations to continue the missions we started and to bear witness to the dreams we have dared to dream.

About the Author

A civil engineer and researcher in international relations, Ahmed Maher has been actively engaged for more than 15 years in supporting democratic transition and human rights and has participated in numerous initiatives related to environmental justice and addressing climate change. He holds a bachelor's degree in civil engineering, along with several specialized diplomas in political science, civil society, and NGO management. He was a co-founder and coordinator of the April 6 Youth Movement and a member of the Coalition of Revolutionary Youth. He is currently pursuing a master's degree in international relations at the Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Alexandria University.

Acknowledgments

This monograph has taken years to come to fruition. Much of it was written during the long nights and early mornings when I was confined from 6 P.M. to 6 A.M.—hours that forced stillness but also offered the clarity to reflect on struggle, hope, and the enduring costs of pursuing change. In that quiet, I carried with me the voices and sacrifices of the April 6 Movement, and the conviction that our story must be told.

I am deeply grateful to Insiya Raja for her careful editing, which rendered these reflections into English with precision and respect, and to Michelle McElroy for her steady dedication in guiding this work through every stage of its completion.

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He slept in his car. Parked in a different neighborhood every night. Swapped out phones. Changed routes. Took meetings with factory workers in El Mahalla. Called on the urban poor of Cairo. Learned from Serbs who had toppled a dictator how to map a power structure, find its fault lines, and move a population to seize the levers of power.

Ahmed Maher spent years building something his government didn't see coming.

Going Behind the Sun is the story of the Egyptian revolution from the inside: the years of learning and preparation, the new technologies turned into instruments of mass mobilization, the coalitions forged and the betrayals that followed, the secret negotiations while a dictatorship assessed how seriously to take them. And then eighteen days in Tahrir Square.

Maher writes the full story. What victory cost when the authorities who replaced the old regime moved to criminalize the very methods that had ended the Mubarak regime. What it takes to hold a vision of a free Egypt when the state has decided you are an enemy.

A Prison.
A Reckoning.
A Revolution.

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