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Revolution as a Life-Altering Experience: The Case of Egypt

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On February 25, 2020, Hosni Mubarak, the former president of Egypt, died at age 91. The Office of the Presidency announced that Mubarak would be given a military funeral and that three days of national mourning would follow. On state-controlled media, commentators hailed Mubarak's military past as well as his accomplishments, especially in foreign policy. Yet everyone seemed to steer away from mentioning how the president had come to relinquish power in 2011. Egypt's main newspaper, *Al Ahram*, simply noted that he had been in power until February 11, 2011, when he resigned and delegated his powers to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF); there was no mention of the "January 25 Revolution" and the protests that led to the change in leadership. On social media, Egyptians engaged in heated debates about the legacy of Mubarak's thirty-year-long presidency. The virulent exchanges were clearly as much about the former president as they were about the memory of the Egyptian Revolution of 2011—or what remained of it.

The coverage of Mubarak's death might lead us to believe that not much remains of the unprecedented wave of protest that shook Egypt between 2011 and 2013. It would seem that the majority of active participants in the 2011 movement have moved on and left that experience behind. Indeed, the conventional wisdom on waves of mass protest tends to portray them as ephemeral moments of anger that subside without a trace. Though small groups might radicalize and subsequently engage in violence, it is believed,

the majority of active participants in large protest events seem to quietly return to their previous lives, with little to no lasting consequences for their own lives, the political system, or the society.

Using Egypt's 2011 revolution as a case study, this Brief argues, on the contrary, that participation in mass protests has myriad consequences. In closed political systems, the mere act of protesting constitutes a break with everyday life, experienced as intense emotional moments that often shape people's attitudes and life trajectories. Though some participants in Egypt's uprising tried to leave that period behind—and most retreated, strictly speaking, from political activities— the main discourses and issues invoked in the mass protests have remained relevant and continue to impact people's lives. The revolutionary experience led many to question what was normal and possible in their other life spheres, including friendship circles, family, and the workplace. Involvement often had life-altering effects on participants' private lives, notably in issues related to gender, parenting, and professional careers. These effects are easy to overlook, but they can increase the likelihood of long-term social, political, and cultural change.

From Protesting to Questioning "Normal Lives"

The Arab uprisings from 2011 to today share some commonalities. Many of these mass protests emerged in a context of long-standing stalemate. For decades, Arab states relied on gridlocked political systems, which led to the exclusion of outsiders from the political game. Young people especially felt little sense of ownership of their country and a distant connection to the state. That was very much the case in Egypt.

Life in the late Mubarak era (1981–2011) followed a certain predetermined pattern—especially for young people, who constituted a large share of the population.[1] Youths were expected to be able to earn a living, prepare for marriage (e.g., buy a house, furniture, and a car), get married, and eventually have children—and to be able to provide and care for their family and enjoy the breadth of consumer goods and services available thanks to economic liberalization. And, finally, to lead a quiet, pious life—though not *too* pious, as "too much" piety could mark one as a potential sympathizer of Islamic movements. This pattern left very little space for individual choice and probably nurtured a general trend of distrust of politics, and a corresponding lack of interest in it.[2] For many, it seemed as if all life decisions were already made for them, so that they had little say in how to lead their lives. Opting out of these predetermined life trajectories left one open to some form of marginalization or to a feeling of failure—and, perhaps, to targeting by state agencies. The only remaining viable option for many youths was to migrate and look for a better life abroad.

The unprecedented wave of protests in Egypt, beginning on January 25, 2011, radically changed that widely shared state of mind. For eighteen days, and in most major Egyptian cities, protesters took to the streets, occupied squares, and demanded the removal of the Mubarak regime. On January 28, intense clashes resulted in the breakdown of the dreaded Ministry of Interior. In Cairo, Alexandria, and other major cities, police forces abandoned the streets, leaving the military in charge. President Mubarak appointed a new prime minister, named a vice-president (a long-vacant position), initiated reforms, and promised to leave office at the end of his term in September 2011. But these changes failed to satisfy protesters, and, on February 11, 2011, Hosni Mubarak had to relinquish his power.

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At the time, it seemed that more change had happened in Egypt within weeks than had occurred in the previous three decades.

The story of Walid,[3] a young Egyptian doctor, illustrates how these sudden transformations in the political landscape changed individuals' attitudes. Before 2011, Walid did not show any interest in politics, instead focusing his energy on his work as a medical intern and on learning a foreign language, hoping this would better his odds of emigrating; in his view, staying in his country was not an option. Walid aspired to another life—a freer, more exciting one, where his hard work would be acknowledged. Similarly, Wassim, a successful engineer and father of two, led a quiet and pious life, engaging in leisure activities typical for people from the upper class and never really participating in elections, let alone protests. Nevertheless, the two men's views came to change drastically over the first months of 2011, as they became wholeheartedly engaged in revolutionary politics.

Moreover, before 2011, Egyptian private lives were led in private spaces. Public spaces—whether streets, beaches, or shopping malls (which grew in number during the 1990s and 2000s)—seemed to be either locked down by security scrutiny or privatized to generate profit. Young people found themselves more and more excluded from public spaces, and the state figured as an omniscient and omnipotent behemoth. In the late 2000s, since more than half the population was under 30, it meant that this half had known only one president during their lifetime. The reign of Mubarak, his party, and especially his security apparatuses seemed immutable and untouchable.

This explains why, for Egyptian youth, participating in mass public protest felt like a rupture with that predetermined life pattern. Protest meant a break with the monotony of everyday life. By occupying public spaces and cutting off the normal flow of daily lives, protest subverted established and long-standing practices. Revolutionary protests thus allowed people to experience a renewed sense of agency, of having some form of control over their lives. By breaking down social rules, public protests allow individuals to question their lives and their beliefs. Revolutions are intensely reflexive moments.

Ihab and Ragab, two young men participating in the January 25, 2011 demonstrations in Alexandria, illustrate that point. Although doubtful of what these protests might result in, they both were overrun by strong emotions as they marched through the streets. When they arrived at a large and crowded avenue, they were struck by the scene. "When we saw the numbers around us, our eyes teared up," Ragab told me. Feeling validated by the reactions of people surrounding them, the two young men realized something. As Ragab recalled, "We were walking, and we started to feel that…maybe it's not really a revolution, but for sure, this is the beginning of the end of the regime. This is a start for having our demands met."

Similar examples abound. They all underline how such moments, because of their stark contrast with years—even decades—of what had been defined as normal and possible, constituted extraordinary events in the lives of those who experienced them. In its breaking of routine and its sudden destruction of longstanding norms and values, participation in revolutionary protests allows for opening up areas of doubt, whether about oneself or about how society works. A number of my interviewees between 2011 and 2016 reflected on how they had experienced the 2011 Egyptian Revolution as a personal awakening. They had accepted the status quo for years and never questioned the order of things; in hindsight, these attitudes seemed to them to be a mistake, and they took it upon themselves to correct the course of their lives. Being pious, getting married, having children, getting a lucrative job: All the things that had been taken for granted and had given structure to one's life were now open for debate.

Walid, the doctor, and Wassim, the engineer, both felt similar awakenings: Something bigger than "normal lives," soccer games, and everyday piousness was possible. Behind the apparent dullness of their lives, they could see a higher meaning to their existence and give their lives a direction. Even religion became more meaningful, by their striving to uphold general principles of justice and equity and standing up to unfair treatment and generalized acts of corruption (*fasad*). Anwar, a man in his mid-30s who became particularly committed to the Revolution, could not understand why he had not done more before 2011. Why had he remained silent all those years, while being conscious of injustice? For many people in Egypt, a question that also occupies many social scientists became central: Why did we *not* revolt for so long?

Nevertheless, becoming reflective and feeling an awakening of sorts does not happen in one day—which is why revolutionary upheavals, where actions of collective dissent take place over a long period of time, stretching from several days to months, can foster attitudes of self-doubt. During such turbulent times, participants find themselves exposed to a variety of new discourses, opinions, and worldviews. At the same time, because of the durability of revolutionary upheavals, periods of

mass protest are also times of intense sociableness and conviviality. People make new friends, learn about others' lives, and build strong emotional bonds. They engage with new peers and emerge from those circles with new feelings of self-worth, giving added meaning to their lives.

In times of rebellion, incorporating collective actions as well as individual successes, being and acting together feels both extraordinary and revolutionary. As opposed to expressions of dissent online, the confined spaces of public protest engender intense emotional ties and foster strong forms of solidarity, especially when protesters feel they are under attack. Acts of selflessness and heroism garner attention and praise, often evoking a bygone past: Copts protecting Muslims while they pray; a doctor volunteering to treat injured protesters; a young man using his body to shield others from police forces. Through these actions, protesters are also performing in a theatrical sense, projecting what a new Egypt could be: one with no sectarian violence, a public health system not based on profit, and solidarity between people rather than unfettered individualism.[4]

Moreover, conflict *within* a revolutionary movement can lead to situations wherein people's sense of justice and fairness is deeply threatened. Amgad, a young, pious man who used to be a member of the Alexandrian Salafi Call, a conservative religious movement, found himself more and more critical of the group. He participated in the protests early on and was shocked seeing people next to him being shot with live ammunition and dying "for no reason." For months, these martyrs became a central concern for him—and the timidity of the Salafi Call's positions and its tendency to compromise with state authorities led him to leave the movement behind and to become disillusioned with organized religion and engage in a trajectory of self-doubt.

Involvement in sustained waves of protest, especially when it takes place over weeks or months, may also nurture subtler and more incremental changes over time. Unlike as in other types of collective action, such as strikes or occupation of workplaces, people who protest in public spaces do not know each other and may come from different walks of life. In Cairo, a highlight for many protesters was meeting people from quite different social and economic backgrounds and getting to know them. This was common during the occupation of Tahrir Square, but the same was probably true of other protests and occupations since 2011: people spending hours sharing their personal lives and experiences, describing their work or living conditions, and learning about each other. And the sharing of personal experiences constitutes a strong context for the construction of common grievances.

Furthermore, participation in episodes of mass protest is not restricted to public spaces: The battle is fought on social media as well, as the intense debates that followed Hosni Mubarak's death suggest. The constant exposition of arguments and debates in virtual spaces of almost continuous connection reinforces the politicization process, and online disputes with family members or friends contribute to strengthening one's opinions. Social media can also expand the frameworks in which what is wrong in society is analyzed and what should be done about it is prescribed—and such discourse can occupy increasing amounts of protesters' lives and social time.

There was a particular focus on social media when the Arab uprisings, often dubbed Facebook or Twitter Revolutions, began: Many focused on how social media helped kick-start protests. And social media are also spaces were protests may have afterlives and keep a revolution alive. The main discourses and issues invoked by mass protests thereby do not remain confined to the protest space: They travel with people to their other social lives, whether in friendship circles, in families, or in the workplace.

The Enduring Consequences of Participation in Protests

When mass protests occur, we tend to focus on the direct and obvious consequences of such events. Policymakers and academics usually understand them in terms of changes to the political system in a narrow institutional sense: Did the government become more "democratic"? Did opposition parties gain more power? Was the preexisting distribution of power affected? But this emphasis on institutional politics and on the political game's main actors overlooks the unintended consequences of protest for those who participate.

Since mass protests bring thousands of people previously uninvolved in politics to the street, one of their major effects is to produce an equal number of newly politicized people, who will subsequently behave "in the silent logic of everyday lives, like micro-social change entrepreneurs."[5] They may contribute to small-scale, incremental changes in different contexts and settings, affecting a variety of social spaces and activities, from family structures and gender roles to the functioning and goals of organizations and even markets.

To begin with, protest waves create an infrastructure for future collective action:[6] They produce new cohorts of politicized people who may seek to maintain their political participation even after protests have ended.

Activists can create alternative spaces and convert their know-how and skills into other activities: They might involve themselves in cultural and artistic spaces, create alternative media organizations, or become more engaged in the defense of human rights (including as lawyers). Such activity may, in turn, play an important role in perpetuating certain political traditions or nurturing new or emerging ones, sometimes decades later. For instance, research on Egypt has shown how activists who came of age politically as students in the 1970s played an important role in nurturing many of the protest movements and civil society organizations that emerged in the 1990s and 2000s, eventually culminating in the 2011 protests.[7] They laid the foundation for collective action in the 2000s.

Participating in mass protests can engender not only a feeling of solidarity with respect to other protesters but a sense of obligation toward them as well as to the "cause," thereby making it easier to mobilize networks for future protests. In the days leading up to January 25, 2011, many activists, while quite certain that nothing would come out of the protests that day, still participated, not because they believed their chances of success were high, but because of a "sense of obligation towards the others."[8] This was at a time—the end of 2010—when most political groups were demobilized and feeling the brunt of repression.

That is why it is usually dubious to infer people's disengagement or lack of interest from the visible end of mass protests. A good example of this occurred in Egypt in September 2019, when people took to the streets in several cities to challenge the continued rule of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.[9] Though it might have seemed that the political landscape was completely shut down and that the government firmly controlled all public spaces, significant protests erupted, to the surprise of everyone—probably also to the surprise of the protesters themselves—and led to the arrest of more than four thousand people.

At the same time, the existence of an infrastructure for collective action does not necessarily mean the creation of civil society organizations, human rights groups, and other similar institutions; it can also give rise to broader spaces and networks that keep revolutionary ideas alive. Mada Masr, an independent online medium, is a good example. Since its inception in 2013, it has promoted forms of professional investigative journalism opposed to state-owned media. It does not shy away from positioning itself within the revolutionary camp, seeking to keep the Revolution's memory alive and support its afterlives.

And this can also happen in less formal spaces. Janna, a young woman active in the cultural milieu and with no political affiliation, was nonetheless strongly affected by the 2011 Revolution. In the following decade, she became active in many initiatives, translating texts about politics and culture and making them available to wider audiences; launching and editing an independent local cultural magazine; and helping establish a research center concerned with preserving her city's heritage and its citizens' rights. In a similar way, many academics have moved to produce knowledge more accessible to the general public, making it available on social media and trying to connect their scholarship to the everyday problems of the Egyptian people. All of these practices can be linked, in one way or another, to their experience within the Revolution.

Another space wherein unintended consequences of participation in mass protests can be seen is the private sphere. Individuals experience revolutionary events as personal awakenings: moments in time around which individuals reorganize their personal histories, with a clear *before* and *after*. In that new personal history, "before the revolution" is seen as a time when there was a strong emphasis on living "normal" lives by mainstream standards—when youth followed what Karine Tourné has called filling out the "adulthood checklist": finding a job, getting married, enjoying consumer goods, and having children.[10] After the revolution, none of these items was of self-evident importance.

One way in which the effects of participation in protests can materialize in the private sphere is through a redefinition of gender roles. The participation and prominence of women in the Arab Spring has been well documented.[11] One can easily argue that feminist mobilizations around gender have been one of the central successes of the Arab Spring as well as a sphere in which change is still being fought for, despite the shrinking spaces for political action. For many women, the effects of participation in protests, notably a sense of agency with respect to one's destiny, were probably felt even more strongly than by men. For women living in patriarchal societies, mass protests were a way to denounce a double oppression: in politics and in the home.

As a result, the revolutionary upheavals led many Egyptian women participants to reconsider their lives and priorities, notably the social injunction to get married and have kids. Women also quickly became disappointed with the disregard for women's struggles on the part of many "revolutionary" men, which pushed them to mobilize around specific feminist issues, like

rampant sexual violence (in both public and private spaces) and the unequal distribution of domestic work. As the latter issue in particular gained currency, some men tried to rectify that wide imbalance—notably within new families, although still very timidly. That new wave of gender struggles also impacted the LGBTQ+ cause, mainstreaming its plights and putting it in the public sphere. For instance, one of the protesters mentioned in this Brief was able to fight through a variety of obstacles in order to transition from male to female. This would have been hard to imagine without the revolutionary developments analyzed here.

In private homes, the way parents raise their children is another example of often overlooked changes. Research on the feminist movement suggests that "the education of…activists' children could constitute a way by which former activists could keep working for social change."[12] Former revolutionaries try to transmit certain values to their children. They strive to bring them up within reimagined norms and ethical frameworks, stemming from their own experience. A common feeling among revolutionaries is that they weren't brought up the right way—so they wasted time not being who they should have been. Giving their children the chance to lead different lives becomes a logical consequence of that feeling.

Anwar, the small-business owner in his mid-30s whom we already met, became quite involved in revolutionary politics in 2011—but this involvement was cut short when he was arrested and imprisoned for participating in a banned protest in 2014. Facing many injustices after the revolution—an unrewarding job, a dire economic situation, and an unhappy marriage—he became critical of what he had previously always thought to be the right thing to do. After being released, Anwar retreated from public activism to spend more time with his children. In one of our discussions, he reflected on how he had changed over the years and how the Revolution had reframed his beliefs and values. Specifically, his experience of meeting a variety of people from different backgrounds who had different life experiences, were not obsessed with material things, and valued solidarity and community made him rethink his own values— and, in particular, how those values could affect his children. "Maybe it's too late for me," he reflected. "You know, I have learned things late in my life…I want my son to benefit from these things from the beginning, to understand things early on." What are the things that Anwar evidently believes he did not understand? It is difficult to pin down what he means exactly, but it seems to come down to an idea of *choice*. Anwar wanted his children to be aware that there is not one preordained life

trajectory—that it is okay to deviate from social norms and rules.

Since being released from prison, Anwar has invested a lot in his children's upbringing in several ways. First, he has committed himself to widening their horizons, by enrolling them in artistic programs (in theater, performing arts, and photography—a personal hobby of his). He also refuses to take a hardline stance when it comes to his children's education, in the sense that parents usually put a lot of pressure (sometimes including physical pressure) on their children to score well on tests, get high grades, and eventually get into a good college. This is in part owing to his realization that what is considered a "good college" and a "good degree" was inherited from an old system and can hardly guarantee access to jobs today.[13] What Anwar has come to value more than anything else is his children's *interest* in what they are doing. So, for example, when his eldest suggested he might want to take a technical education route, which is regarded as a path for the lower classes, Anwar encouraged his son: "If that is what he wants to do, it's his choice."

Anwar also tries to nurture more democratic attitudes within the household. Choosing what to watch on TV, for example, is decided by majority vote and not according to his wishes as the house patriarch. This attitude was also visible in his business: He became far more concerned about the well-being of his employees and how he could be fairer to them. He therefore decided to give them better wages and support them in other ways, which directly impacted his own revenues. For Anwar, it was obvious that he needed to practice what he preached. His experience in prison made him believe that a true revolutionary is not someone with just a radical discourse, but rather one who perpetuates revolutionary ideals in his everyday life.

This last point suggests one last important context in which changes can occur. Seeing how contemporary lives revolve around jobs, it stands to reason that people who have invested a lot in their professional lives would regard them as spaces in which to put into practice their revolutionary inclinations. After an initial engagement in the mass protests, Walid, the doctor whom we met earlier, became involved with the Egyptian Medical Syndicate to defend the rights of physicians all over the country. Over time, he also became quite interested in issues of public health: One way to "politicize" his job was to think about how it could improve the lives of the population. Being a physician was no longer only about making money; it had now acquired a noble, politically progressive dimension.

Wassim, the engineer, working in an industrial plant where people from very different walks of life work together, made a point of keeping his office always open to everybody. He spent a lot of time chatting with his co-workers and trying to spread his values of justice and equality through debate and discussion. Speaking what he believed was the truth in every situation, even when it became harmful to his career; displaying moral rectitude in the face of graft and corruption, Wassim chose to lead by example.

Finally, Rosa, a young lawyer, joined a small law firm and worked on criminal cases, but she used both the firm and her free time to do *pro bono* work defending workers, as well as upholding the rights of arrested protesters and political activists.

Implications

What we have been witnessing during the past decade in the Arab world is not just an ephemeral series of events, but rather a fundamental change in the way politics is defined and practiced. Much like decolonization in the mid-20th century, the experience of mass protest in the Arab world may have enduring consequences. Trying to understand how ordinary people have been profoundly changed by these events—particularly the hundreds of thousands of people who have participated in these protests—helps us better understand the ongoing transformations in the region and makes clear that the visible end of upheavals should not necessarily be construed as the end *of* upheavals. The resilience of Arab protesters, from Morocco to Iraq, and the recurring mobilizations of activists are good indicators of that as well.

The absence of people from the streets or squares does not always mean the end of a movement or its failure. Thinking of protest movements only in terms of success or failure suggests a pattern whereby successive protest movements seem to outside observers to have come out of nowhere: They seem to be sudden explosions of anger that might very well disappear as fast as they occurred. By tracking some of the enduring if less visible consequences of participation in protests, my research shows that in Egypt, as probably in other places around the world, we should not mistake quietness for apathy or indifference.

Obviously, the changes we are speaking of do not occur in all cases, and sometimes the unintended consequences can be rather grim, from turning to violence to falling into chronic forms of depression and even self-harm.

This Brief, however, has focused on other outcomes, two of which in particular can help us better understand how these uprisings affected Arab societies and what additional long-term consequences they might yield in the future.

First, on a very basic level, although waves of mass protest seem to have subsided in many places, it does not mean they have definitively disappeared. Loyalty to the cause, and to general principles of freedom, justice, and equality, is still very much present, albeit less visibly. The daily satirical expressions seen online are good examples of that. So many of the people who were affected by the revolutions, who grew up during those times, and who believe in their importance might very well take to the streets and protest in the future.

On a broader level and considering more long-term consequences, participation in mass protests can lead to important social, cultural, and economic changes. By nurturing critical dispositions in individuals, especially with respect to long taken for granted habits, it can fundamentally change relationships to authority, social institutions such as marriage, life goals, ideas of individual success, and the like. In countries where youth constitute such a large share of the population, even though they might not hold power right now or be able to effect change directly, one should not mistake that lack of visibility with the end of a movement.

Endnotes

1   In 2007, 28 percent of Egypt's population was between 15 and 29 years old, and more than half the population was under 30. Quoted in Dina Shehata, "Youth Activism in Egypt", *Arab Reform Initiative*, 23 (Paris: 2008), 2.

2   In 2010, in a report about Egypt, the United Nations Development Programme noted "an extremely low interest in politics and political action among youth." See: Heba Handoussa et al., *Egypt Human Development Report 2010: Youth in Egypt; Building our Future* (Cairo).

3   All names have been changed.

4   Youssef El-Chazli, "On the Road to Revolution: How Did 'Depoliticised' Egyptians Become Revolutionaries?" *Revue Française de science politique*, 62, 5 (2012), 843–65.

5   Olivier Fillieule and Erik Neveu, eds., *Activists Forever? Long-Term Impacts of Political Activism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 17.

6   Salwa Ismail, *Political Life in Cairo's New Quarters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

7   Dina El Khawaga, "La génération seventies en Égypte: La société civile comme répertoire d'action alternatif," [The Seventies Generation in Egypt: Civil Society as an Alternative Action Repertoire] in *Résistances et protestations dans les mondes Musulmans* [Resistance and Protest in the

Muslim Worlds], ed. Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi and Olivier Fillieule (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2003), 271–92.

8   Interviews with several Alexandrian activists.

9   Declan Walsh, "Rare Protests against Egypt's Leader Erupt in Cairo and Elsewhere," *The New York Times*, September 20, 2019.

10   Karine Tourné, " Le chômeur et le prétendant" [The Unemployed and the Suitor], *Égypte/Monde arabe*, 4-5 (Cairo : CEDEJ, 2001).

11   Hind Ahmed Zaki, "Why Did Women's Rights Expand in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia?" *Middle East Brief*, no. 131 (Brandeis University, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, October 2019).

12   Camille Masclet, "Examining the Intergenerational Outcomes of Social Movements: The Case of Feminist Activists and Their Children," in *The Consequences of Social Movements*, ed. Lorenzo Bosi, Marco Giugni, and Katrin Uba (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 106–29.

13   See Nader Habibi and Fatma El-Hamidi, "Why Are Egyptian Youth Burning Their University Diplomas? The Overeducation Crisis in Egypt," *Middle East Brief*, no. 102 (Brandeis University, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, September 2016).

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