

EXTRACT

# MEDIA, REVOLUTION AND POLITICS IN EGYPT

THE STORY OF AN UPRISING

ABDALLA F. HASSAN



REUTERS  
INSTITUTE for the  
STUDY of  
JOURNALISM

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## About the Book

For too long Egypt's system of government was beholden to the interests of the elite in power, aided by the massive apparatus of the security state. Breaking point came on 25 January 2011. But several years after popular revolt enthralled a global audience, the struggle for democracy and basic freedoms are far from being won. *Media, Revolution, and Politics in Egypt: The Story of an Uprising* examines the political and media dynamic in pre- and post-revolution Egypt and what it could mean for the country's democratic transition. We follow events through the period leading up to the 2011 revolution, eighteen days of uprising, military rule, an elected president's year in office, his ouster by the army, and the re-establishment of the military presidency. Activism has expanded freedoms of expression only to see those spaces contract with the resurrection of the police state. And with sharpening political divisions, the facts have become amorphous as ideological trends cling to their own narratives of truth.

This is a careful account of journalism's roller coaster ride in the course of a decade in Egypt, by a writer, fully engaged with the country's politics and culture and its struggle for a civil society. It is rigorously detailed and sourced, and breathes the air of liberation. Abdalla Hassan has shown, uniquely well, the forces at play in Egyptian society and the result is a most valuable testament.

John Lloyd, Contributing Editor at the Financial Times  
and Senior Research Fellow, RISJ

## About the Author

Abdalla F. Hassan has worked as a multimedia journalist, editor and documentary filmmaker based in Egypt for nearly two decades. In 2010 he was a journalist fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford.

**What follows is a short extract from this book.**

**More information can be found at: [www.ibtauris.com/reuters](http://www.ibtauris.com/reuters)**

## EXTRACT

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*For my parents and sisters with love*

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Rebellion! I do not know when that Rebellion will come,  
it might be in a week or in a hundred years,  
but I know . . . that sooner or later justice will be done.  
(George Orwell, *Animal Farm*)

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## Foreword

This is at once a careful account of journalism's roller-coaster ride during the course of a decade in Egypt, and the testament of a liberally minded writer, fully engaged with the country's politics and culture and its struggle for a civil society in the Middle East's most populous state. It is rigorously detailed and sourced, and breathes the air of liberation – from the stifling rule evident from the early 2000s, reaching its flood from the uprising of 2011 through 2013, when an inept and unyielding Muslim Brotherhood government was toppled, then closed down once more by a more favoured military-backed order.

Abdalla Hassan is no romantic. He sees that the regime of Field Marshal Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, elected president in 2014, is a popular one because of its strongly patriotic stance and its appearance of strength in combating the (quite real) jihadist terrorism at work in Egypt. The news media, raucously free for a few years, have – with a few exceptions – come to heel, apparently of their own volition.

Still, something happened – and is still, in a subterranean way, happening. The authorities, as in other repressive states, have lost the ability to completely control the news media they could claim in the early years of military rule, in which Gamal Abd al-Nasser, one of the group of officers who overthrew the monarchy in 1952, was pre-eminent. The internet and social media do not make or sustain a revolution, but they provide networks of revolt and dissidence much harder to rub out than in the pre-digital age.

State propaganda, however, has also become stronger, in part by using the same digital tools, in larger part by controlling the messages that television, by far the strongest medium, puts out. Propaganda can be ignored or mocked, as it was in the closing years of President Hosni Mubarak's 30-year term, but it is potent when there is a real fear of external machinations and internal subversion, and when the theme of patriotic unity is hammered home day after day. In Egypt, the distance between the

intelligentsia (including the media) and the people is usually much greater than that between the people and the army.

The media take on an extra importance in Egypt, as in all authoritarian states, when they are suppressed, and are mixed in with the arts. Where politics is quelled, everything becomes at least potentially political, especially the novel, theatre, and cinema. Hassan makes this wonderfully clear, by giving the plots and the reception of so much that was published and shown.

Like many who were relieved at an end to the Muslim Brotherhood government, he is appalled by the harshness of military-dominated rule. He sees, clearly, that a refashioned authoritarianism presently sustains itself by the support of an approving public, who have made plain they prefer the hard smack of control by army officers to the soft jihadism of the Brotherhood.

Yet though the Arab Spring went straight to winter, it threw up a challenge, which for a while saw the press, and above all television channels, open up to the many voices loosed by the protesters and the would-be democrats. Although such manifestations as China's Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, or the large-scale protests in Russia in 2011–12, have been put down, it is hard to believe that the causes for which they were mounted have ceased to exert a pull, especially on the younger generations.

One of these causes is that journalism be allowed to seek something closer to the truth about the society in which it operates, and to provide a forum for wide debate and the deployment of new ideas. Abdalla Hassan has shown, uniquely well, the forces at play in Egyptian society that attempted to break through to such a space, as well as the presently greater force that stops it doing so. The result is a most valuable testament.

John Lloyd  
Contributing Editor at the *Financial Times*  
and Senior Research Fellow, RISJ

## 1

## Prologue to Revolution

*The newspapers' sting at first seemed slight and was conveniently disregarded, but its cumulative effect proved dangerous. By aggressively projecting political messages to its readers and generating active political debate among an expanding reading public . . . the press helped create a climate for political action that would eventually undermine the British hold on the country.*

(Ami Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East*<sup>1</sup>)

Early in the morning of 20 March 2003 bombs began falling on Iraq. The allied invasion had started. Hours later, demonstrations erupted on university campuses around Cairo. At noon, protesters converged on downtown Cairo's bustling Tahrir Square in a demonstration that continued for 12 hours, dubbing the area the 'liberated territories' of Tahrir, which itself means 'liberation.' The demonstration was largely peaceful until riot police turned water cannons on protesters, some hurling stones, as they attempted to march to the United States Embassy nearby. As night fell, demonstrators continued chanting, lighting candles, and singing.

The next day, a Friday, observant Muslims gathered at the Sayeda Zeinab Mosque, one of Cairo's largest and oldest. Set among crowded tenement blocks and street markets in an impoverished neighbourhood, it has been home to impromptu protests against US Middle East policy in the past. The day after the bombardment began, the imam recounted Islam's early military victories but made no direct mention of the war in Iraq. Following congregational prayers, worshippers stood in prayer for the souls of deceased Muslims in 'America's war'.

In sidewalk cafés across Egypt television sets were tuned to Al Jazeera, the Qatari satellite news channel, as Iraq faced a showdown with the world's greatest military powers. Al Jazeera regularly showed images of dead and wounded Iraqi civilians, many of them children – the fallout of

what had been billed as a surgical, hi-tech war. Not shying away from controversial political issues, Al Jazeera broke barriers with its revolutionary style and approach. The network gained enemies everywhere. Arab states disliked its examination of internal politics and its habit of offering dissidents from across the political spectrum, from secular pro-democracy advocates to die-hard Islamists, airtime to defend their political views. Censorship was more elusive in the world of satellite broadcast and live news coverage.

A nearby café was broadcasting Al Jazeera, reporting that an estimated 50,000–55,000 protesters were rallying at al-Azhar Mosque. Al Jazeera's cameras showed images of security forces turning water cannons on the demonstrators. Organisers had planned the protest to begin at al-Azhar and make its way to Tahrir Square in the afternoon. The interior minister had warned that no demonstrations or rallies were to take place in public squares or major thoroughfares. Security forces cordoned off Tahrir Square early on, but demonstrators began gathering in the surrounding streets. Riot police with sticks, dogs, and water cannons charged at protesters. As demonstrators fled into nearby buildings and alleys, security forces chased them, often beating and striking protesters as they retreated.

In a nationally televised address the day before the start of war, President Hosni Mubarak had blamed Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein for making war inevitable. 'My hope is that the Iraqi government will realise the seriousness of the situation in which it put itself – and us – in,' Mubarak told his audience. Many viewers were apparently not convinced. '*Irhal, irhal, ya Mubarak* – Leave, Mubarak, leave,' many shouted at the 21 March demonstrations. Outrage was not just about a war in Iraq, but dissatisfaction with how things were at home.

Protesters increasingly criticised the Egyptian government for its handling of the ruined economy, widespread corruption, and the perpetual renewal of Egypt's draconian emergency laws. The state of emergency gave the government broad powers to arrest and detain individuals indefinitely without charge or try them in extraordinary State Security courts where verdicts cannot be appealed. 'That's the danger of using brute force [to suppress demonstrations],' said one protester questioned about the new willingness to risk criticising Mubarak in public. 'It brings the enemy close to home.' A wave of arrests quickly followed. While daily demonstrations continued to attract thousands of students on university campuses, the security forces' iron-fisted policy managed to stop unsanctioned street protests.<sup>2</sup>

## Until the end of his days

In his first speech as president in 1981, Mubarak said he would not serve more than two terms and his name would not grace buildings or his likeness feature on monuments. Both promises were broken. In 1993, with Mubarak's second term in its final year, parliament approved a constitutional amendment, voted on in a public referendum, which allowed him to run unchallenged for an indefinite number of terms. 'Here in Egypt, we don't have previous or future presidents,' wrote best-selling Egyptian novelist Alaa Al Aswany in a *New York Times* op-ed, 'only the present head of state who seized power through sham elections and keeps it by force, and who will probably remain in power until the end of his days.'<sup>3</sup>

Much to the chagrin of human rights defenders, the regime maintained emergency laws in effect, imprisoned and detained political dissidents, and narrowly restricted access to the political process. Power was firmly concentrated in the hands of the executive branch. The legislature, dominated by the ruling National Democratic Party, merely served to rubber-stamp presidential directives. By the 1980s the Muslim Brotherhood had become the main organised opposition group in the People's Assembly.

On public university campuses, corruption was endemic, ruling party loyalists controlled university appointments, political freedoms were stifled, the quality of education suffered, the Islamist trend commanded a strong presence, and the security apparatus kept tabs on students and professors. When the novelist Miral al-Tahawy entered college in the late 1980s the Brotherhood dominated campus activities, everything from sports and excursions to theatre and publishing. This Islamic alternative to what many saw as a nation's corrupt and failing institutions persuaded many Egyptian students to cling to hopes of change through religion. Without other channels for political action on the campus of Zagazig University, al-Tahawy joined the then-underground religious organisation. She was selected to write for the magazine of the Muslim Brotherhood, *Liwa' al-Islam* (Banner of Islam, formerly *al-Da'wa* or 'The Call'), focusing on themes of morality and virtue within a literary narrative.

It is a phase she has described as her 'political adolescence'. The first and essential lesson for recruits of the Muslim Brotherhood is to listen and obey, recalled al-Tahawy. 'Soldier, obedience; obedience, soldier; command, inhibition', the words rolling off her tongue in a staccato marching

order. 'It makes you feel as if you are in the army of salvation,' she said. 'You are not engaged in political action, you are engaged in military action.' Instead of finding greater freedom, she found herself in a setting that was more dictatorial. 'The world of the Brotherhood is not democratic,' she said. 'It is very oppressive to any member who thinks, or discusses, or objects.'<sup>4</sup>

Novelist Sonallah Ibrahim publicly refused a state literary prize in 2003. 'I have no doubt that every Egyptian here realises the size of the disaster besetting our country,' he declared at the award ceremony.

*We no longer have theatre, cinema, scientific research, or education. We only have festivals and a fund of lies. We no longer have industry, agriculture, health, or justice. Corruption and pillage spreads. And whoever objects faces abuse, beatings, and torture. The exploitative few have wrested our spirit from us. The reality is frightening, and in light of this reality, a writer cannot close his eyes or be silent.*

For this reason Ibrahim chose to reject an award 'from a government that in my opinion does not possess the credibility to grant it'. He stepped away from the podium to wild cheers and applause, leaving a stunned minister of culture holding the award cheque of 100,000 Egyptian pounds (\$17,000).<sup>5</sup>

Mubarak tended not to jail the literati, yet his regime had other tools at its disposal, from blacklisting artists from state cultural institutions to buying the loyalty of the cultural elite. 'He allowed a margin for the arts and culture limited by boundaries he wanted to place,' said the colloquial poet Gamal Bekheet. 'We were on opposing sides with the regime. Between us was a game of tug of war. He reached a conviction at one time that the best thing for him to do is to dissipate the emotions of people: Let them say what they want and we will do what we want.'<sup>6</sup>

## **A message in comedy**

Catering to an elite audience, theatre offered a unique space for expression, portraying the realities of despotic regimes through parody. The 1989 comedic play *Takharif* (Delusions), directed and starring Muhammad Sobhi, has a dictator reigning over the fictional land of Antika. Having attained power, the ruler of the island nation announces plans to govern democratically by declaring a dictatorship and jailing

everyone who helped him stage a coup. Attired in boots and a trench coat, the dictator, who bears a striking resemblance to Adolf Hitler and slips into the cadences of former President Anwar Sadat, issues one unintelligible decree after another: 'If you find a citizen who understands me,' he orders, 'arrest him!'

A messenger comes to the ruler, who now has been in power for 20 years, and informs him that the population is rebelling because they cannot find bread. The dictator issues decree number 48,933 ordering the arrest of the bakers, declaring them enemies of the people.

'The bakers say they can't find flour,' says the messenger.

'Then arrest the flour traders!' barks the dictator.

'The traders did not receive flour from the farmers.'

'Arrest the farmers!'

'Then we will not find anything to eat.'

'Arrest those who won't eat!' quips the dictator.

When the dictator discovers a bomb in his desk, foiling an assassination attempt, he is determined to find out what the people truly want. He requests to speak with a citizen. Clothed in rags, citizen number 1,591 is brought before him.

'You are the representative of the people,' the dictator tells him. 'Talk without fear. Talk. Release what is in your head. Let out what is in your heart. *Without fear!* Do not be afraid of anything. You are free, and the son of the free. This is your historic hour. You are at the pinnacle of justice and democracy, so you should speak. Talk with your soul for today you will be asked before the people. *Without fear!* Do not be afraid of anything at all. Today you are envied. Why? Because you are standing before your servants, not your rulers. *Without fear!* I have a question and I want an honest answer. Are you an absolute supporter of me, my rule, and my government or do you belong to the opposition? *Without fear!* You do not need to be afraid of anything at all. Talk. Talk freely and democratically. Talk for today you are before your father. I am your father – better than the ones who gave birth to you. You are in my heart. If you took a knife and opened my chest, you'll find my heart. Do not be shocked, for it is one of the organs of my body. If you severed my heart in two – left chambers, right chambers, and an aorta – and you found yourself situated there, know that you are in my heart of hearts. You are forever in my heart, my blood, my tears, and my smile. Talk. Answer my question. Ah, you might have forgotten the question. Look at me as I ask the question. Fellow citizen, are you an absolute supporter of me, my rule, and my government (*nods his*

*head*) – do you understand? – or are you, God forbid, from the opposition (*gestures throat being slit*)? And do not forget that you are in my heart.’

‘The dictator who demands the support of people . . .’ begins citizen 1,591.

‘Thank you, fellow citizen,’ says the dictator. ‘By the constitution, I allowed him to speak. Now go home to your mother.’

The dictator’s wife cajoles him to allow the citizen to finish what he was saying.

‘But that is against the constitution,’ he informs her.

‘Give me the microphone and I will tell you that the world supports me,’ says the poverty-stricken citizen.

‘Give you the microphone?’ admonishes the dictator. ‘Do you know how much it costs? Give you the microphone so you can take it apart and sell it? Give you the microphone so that you can walk among the people, who you know are mostly illiterate?’

‘You have been in power for 20 years. No one but you benefits from keeping the people illiterate,’ the citizen challenges the dictator.

‘I gave the people their freedom. I was not greedy,’ the dictator says. ‘And when they have their freedom, they use it against me. We are your masters, not your rulers!’

The citizen describes how low wages and high taxes have forced people to work less and accept bribes. ‘Believe me, no one can fool the people, either in Antika or anywhere else in the world.’

In his 1991 satire *Mama Amrika* (Mother America), Muhammad Sobhi portrays Arab states as bickering siblings, made obvious by his open character impersonation of Hosni Mubarak, who views it in his interests to court America. The play’s message is a strong condemnation of the US and its ally Israel, who exploit the weak and powerless for self-interest. Sobhi’s character Ayish Shahat (literally: living as a beggar) is tricked into marrying the wealthy Amira Kamel (symbolising America), who claims to stand for human rights as she conspires with her cousin Shuman al-Shaffat (symbolising Israel) to drug and swindle Ayish. When he discovers the plot and demands a divorce, he finds himself accused of being a terrorist. ‘A call from an impoverished Egyptian citizen to all the capitals of the world: Watch out for the new world order that aims to destroy our nation by those who kill for profit,’ warns Sobhi’s character.

Films have used humour to broach the topic of the Arab world’s long-reigning rulers, such as the 2006 comedy *Zaza*, starring actor Hany Ramzy. Censorship authorities did not want comparisons with Egypt’s regime to

be obvious and so a made-up flag was represented in the film and there was no mention of the name of the country. The nation's autocratic ruler aims to achieve a veneer of democracy by announcing contested presidential elections, but the state assassinates opposition candidates because they pose a threat to the regime.

When the interior minister is invited on a talk show, Zaza's job at a television station is to mimic various callers asking whimsical questions. In one call, he interjects by saying, why do we even need presidential elections in the first place, since the one we know is better than the one we don't. Zaza sticks to the script as the minister's agents menacingly stand watch over him. Interior minister Gaber Mansour quietly dismisses the notion that the government was behind the accidental death of two presidential candidates. Yet the incidents have scared away potential opponents, and with two days left until the close of nominations, no one has come forward. To convince at least one candidate to run, Mansour announces that the state will insure the life of a political contender to the tune of five million Egyptian pounds.

Television presenter Rasha Basbous also works in league with the Interior Ministry and decides to help Mansour find a candidate for the ruse elections. She drugs Zaza and accuses him of rape. To avoid charges, Zaza reluctantly agrees to be the presidential candidate. The chief of staff informs President Metwally al-Hennawy that a citizen has been found who will run against him in the elections. 'All this is because of external pressures,' the chief of staff explains.

In television appearances Zaza vows to address the needs of the masses. 'I am a citizen just like you. I feel your hunger and poverty. I dream your dreams. And what's more important is that I love you. I love you all – the poor above the rich, the weak before the strong,' he tells viewers. 'I wish to do a lot of things and above all to restore our dignity: I want to prevent citizens from being subject to insult and humiliation.'

The political newcomer skyrockets in popularity. 'Zaza made us dream in an age when dreaming was forbidden,' remarks one citizen. 'If he dies, our dreams die.' President al-Hennawy has Zaza and Rasha Basbous arrested and referred to military trial, an act that receives global condemnation. Ambassador John Marsh and the Secretary of State Old Spice meet al-Hennawy and demand their release.

Zaza meets the president for the first time in a presidential debate. When the sitting president is asked about his platform, he promises pay raises, housing for those in need, land to peasants, and jobs for graduates.

Zaza's platform centres on love, freedom, and justice. Oppression and inequality have increased, he tells al-Hennawy.

'I was never an oppressor and oppression is not something I like,' the president says in his defence. 'You are trying to distort my image. My door is always open.'

'Yes, to the clique that you put between yourself and us – not to the people. Those around you tell you that our country is heaven and that all the people kiss your feet,' says Zaza.

'Your words are not true. They are lies. What you say has not been mentioned in the reports I receive,' says al-Hennawy.

'You receive information from reports that benefit whom? The person who raises his voice is a terrorist and the person who minds his business is a villain. What have they told you about the high bills and long queues?'

'How will you rule the country?' asks the president.

'No barriers or doors will be placed between myself and the people. No clique or relatives or friends. The people will have my mobile number. Whoever needs me will find me.'

'You will rule the country with your mobile?' al-Hennawy says disdainfully.

'No, I will rule it with my heart. The people need a heart to rule them, not a mind to control them,' replies Zaza as the audience cheers. 'We are with you with our hearts,' the crowd roars back.

Zaza wins 90% of the vote on election day. When introduced to the ministers, the president-elect says, 'I know them all. Since I was born they haven't changed.' He takes the ministers undercover to a police station where a detainee is being whipped as he hangs by his feet. Zaza strips the lapels off the officers committing the violations and sends them off to jail.

Ambassador Marsh goes to see President Zaza. His country has decided on a military strike against a leader in the region and requests that Zaza approve the use of his nation's airports and facilities for the attack. Zaza's willingness to go along will be in exchange for economic assistance.

To protect his nation's sovereignty and transform it into a regional power, Zaza cleverly negotiates a deal to purchase advanced weaponry from a European country. In his first speech to the people, Zaza announces a programme for development that includes punishment for those who have robbed the nation's wealth and an end to the system of graft that benefits those with money and connections. He issues his first decision as president: accept the Cabinet's resignation and investigate the violations

government ministers have committed against the people. Zaza receives word during his speech that the arms shipment he brokered has arrived. His second decision is to refuse all foreign aid, which has always come with strings attached. The crowds enthusiastically exclaim, 'Keep the aid and leave us alone!'

Ambassador Marsh now orders the president's assassination. A sniper is in position. Zaza issues his third decision: a review of all international agreements that have been signed during previous eras. A shot rings out, striking the young visionary president. 'We will speak, even if we die,' cries the song at the end of the film, delivering a powerful message against dictatorship and foreign control. While packaged as a comedy, the allusions to Mubarak and his rule were all too plain.

The 2009 comedic film *al-Diktatur* (The Dictator) takes place in the strategically placed nation of Bambouzia. The story begins when an army general, Shanan al-Geyushi, assumes power by assassinating the ruler in a palace coup. When Shanan has a nightmare that free and fair presidential elections have unseated him from power, he rounds up the opposition and has them shot. The dictator's twin sons, Hakim and Aziz, are groomed to assume positions of power. An extravagant playboy, Aziz is sent off to Egypt where his antics are concealed from public scrutiny, while Hakim embarks on a privatisation drive where everything in Bambouzia is up for sale to foreign investors. When rebellion breaks out across the land, military officers turn against the ruler. Shanan and Hakim are arrested, tried in a military tribunal, and sentenced to death, but miraculously escape. Not exactly a warning to despots, the film ends with Shanan and his sons returning to power.

Hany Ramzy played the role of citizen 1,591 in the play *Delusions* while studying acting by day at Cairo's Higher Institute for Performance Art. As a film star his run-ins with the censors started with the 2001 *Gawaz bi-qarar gumhuri* (Marriage by Presidential Decree), the first and last film where Mubarak made a cameo appearance with the aid of computer graphics. Ramzy's character, Amr Bayoumy, is a low-level employee at the Foreign Ministry's archives and the son of a struggling actor. Engaged to his childhood sweetheart Reham, he sends a wedding invitation to the president on a whim. Seeking to appear closer to common Egyptians, the president surprisingly accepts. Crooked politicians and apathetic officials become attentive, vigilantly beautifying the impoverished quarter where the street wedding will be held. Residents find through Amr the only way to reach the president. The prospective groom receives

thousands of letters containing their simple requests. Yet the glare of the spotlight splits the young couple apart. What ensues next is comic drama as the chief of staff, determined not to disappoint the president, goes to great lengths to get them back together. At the film's conclusion, the president appears at the wedding where Amr and Reham, reunited, hand him thousands of citizens' demands.

'Among the red lines were personalities that have halos around them, eliciting panic, fear, and concern. They could not be touched, like the president of the Arab Republic of Egypt,' said Ramzy. An appeal to the president's sons, Alaa and Gamal Mubarak, finally got *Marriage by Presidential Decree* to clear the censors, the actor disclosed. The problem was not just with Mubarak's presence but with allusions to a corrupt regime unaware of the problems of citizens or negligent in solving them. 'The people that he has as governors, members of the People's Assembly, ministers – each one of them is a guise, the "clique of beneficiaries", as they say,' remarked Ramzy.

The screenplay of another film where Ramzy played the lead role, the 2003 *'Ayiz haqi* (I Want My Rights), remained in the censor's drawers for six years, denied filming approval. And when it was finally made, it faced a host of problems from the censoring body, which demanded revisions to eliminate similarities with known political leaders. Ramzy plays Saber al-Tayib, a taxi driver who comes across articles in the constitution that declare public property to be owned by the people and each citizen is entitled to a portion of national production. Engaged for six years yet lacking sufficient savings for marriage, Saber decides to sell his allotment of the nation's assets. He wages a campaign to gather proxies from 51% of the population, allowing all of them to sell their national stake. He is arrested for being a gang leader, jailed, battered, charged with inciting the public, placed on trial, and finally acquitted. But when it comes time to sell a majority of the nation's assets at a public auction to a group of anonymous multinational investors, Saber decides to abort the deal.

*Zaza* was originally scripted as a fantasia set 50 years in the future. 'Why a fantasia? Why not make it a reality?' thought Ramzy, who played the part of Zaza. 'When we came to make it a reality, the censors opposed. So we decided to say that in some country at a certain time. But the important thing was that people understood that we were talking about Egypt.' *Zaza* faced quandaries with film censors not the least because the film expressed the audacious notion of actually voting out a sitting

president. One of the parts of the film snipped out by the censors was of the former ministers being placed on trial.

Another scene the censors objected to was when Zaza, touring with ministers as they inspect police stations and government agencies, abandons his retinue and drives off. He notices a prostitute. She initially thinks the president is propositioning her but he wants to understand what motivates her to sell her body. The dialogue between Zaza and the woman could have been one of the film's most moving. She pulls out a strip of drugs. Zaza asks her if she is an addict. She says no, but that if she were ever arrested by the police she would swallow the pills and take her own life to save her family from shame. 'There were moments where the woman was crying and I was crying for her,' recalled Ramzy. The censors were unwavering in their disapproval. Prostitution could not be acknowledged and a fictional leader could not be seen fraternising or sympathising with a working girl. In negotiations with the censors, Ramzy and the producers reluctantly agreed to the cut in order to have the film approved.<sup>7</sup>

## **A louder protest movement**

Demanding political reform, the Egyptian Movement for Change, or Kifaya (Enough) as it was commonly called, emerged in the summer of 2004 to oppose the uncontested election referendum that would hand Mubarak another six years in power. The activist coalition comprised of sundry political trends also rejected the inheritance of political power from father, elder Mubarak, to son, Gamal, already a prominent figure in the National Democratic Party, known for its opaque, backroom policy-making. Kifaya sought the right to protest in the streets and took risks in directly criticising the president.<sup>8</sup> Their rallies were virtually ignored by Egyptian state television.

Under growing international pressure to create a façade of greater political participation, Mubarak in a televised speech on 26 February 2005 announced that article 76 of the Egyptian constitution would be amended to allow for the nation's first contested presidential elections. But when the amendment was drafted, it outlined such stringent standards that it would have meant the ruling party choosing its opposition in presidential elections. According to a confidential US Embassy cable, Mubarak told a visiting congressional delegation that he was 'begging' candidates to run in the presidential election. The constitutional amendment was for 'the future,

not for me', he said. 'But all must be done at the right speed, Mubarak cautioned, saying he could not make the people do "a high jump" yet,' the diplomatic cable reported. Mubarak laughed off the notion of having presidential debates, 'suggesting that such activities were inappropriate for Egypt's political process.'<sup>9</sup>

In an interview with the Kuwait newspaper *al-Siyasa* (Politics), reprinted in the state-owned *al-Ahram* (The Pyramids) and *al-Akhbar* (The News) on 14 May 2005, Mubarak alleged that Kifaya protesters were paid and that their demonstrations were chasing away foreign direct investment and worsening unemployment. Denouncing the sham constitutional changes, Kifaya activists held street rallies, including one on 25 May, the day of the national referendum, in two locations in central Cairo – in front of the Journalists' Syndicate and at the mausoleum of nationalist leader Sa'd Zaghlul. Women protesters were harassed, beaten, and sexually molested by plain-clothes policemen and thugs allied with the regime as riot police looked on, an incident recorded in images that generated widespread outrage. The movement earned international media attention, focusing criticism on the government's heavy-handed tactics.

State television on the other hand reported a record turnout for the referendum that would bring Egypt one step closer to democracy, showed voters casting their ballots and heaping praise on the president. Kifaya, which has spawned other grass-roots movements calling for greater freedoms, organised a silent candle-lit vigil expressing anger at the indecent assault of women activists. Creative in their use of signs and slogans, activists again took to the streets a month later when Mubarak nominated himself for the presidency.

When the Islamist movement Hamas emerged victorious in the January 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections, any external pressures on Mubarak to implement gradual democratic reform dissipated. Security agencies restricted the spaces for human rights campaigning, the media, and activism, particularly the right to protest, which had opened up in 2004 and 2005, yet a greater public awareness and a demand for rights had already become rooted. Judges and activists staged sit-ins and protests lobbying for the independence of the judiciary, which were met with massive police presence, arrests, and violence against protesters and journalists.

The independent newspaper *Sawt al-umma* (The Nation's Voice) published the initials of judges believed to have been accomplices to electoral fraud. Counsellors and vice presidents of the Court of Cassation Hesham al-Bastawissy and Mahmoud Mekki<sup>10</sup> were charged by a disciplinary

council with defaming a judge in *Sawt al-umma* by accusing him of vote rigging. Rallying for the independence of the judiciary, judges and activists took to the streets on 25 May 2006 in a demonstration in front of Cairo's High Court of Justice, one year after the flawed constitutional referendum.

Activist blogger Wael Abbas got involved in online chat forums in the late 1990s, which evolved into a Yahoo! Group he formed called 'Former Internet Junkies', so named because it focused on political, religious, and social discussions rather than frivolous internet obsessions. At the time Arabic publishing online was still new and few software tools were available for Arabic enabled sites. Abbas began publishing his work in online journals and electronic forums to reach the widest possible audience. Subscribers to Former Internet Junkies brought up topics, including the president's family dealings and rumoured plans for his son's succession, which were then taboo subjects to be examined openly. The group's members reached 10,000 before being hacked.

In 2004 Abbas started blogging, a task that did away with the chore of designing web pages and made his work immune from revision or censorship by moderators of digital publications, plus it had the element of interactivity. He also had the freedom to upload videos and as many photos as he liked. Abbas followed the burgeoning protest movement in his blog, a subject that the new independent print media was cautious about covering consistently or in-depth. Abbas soon found the images he posted being reproduced in newspapers. He doggedly pursued police torture allegations and sexual harassment incidents, posting videos on his YouTube channel that broke the story open, eventually gathering a flurry of media attention. His actions have not come without security harassment. Nonetheless, Abbas was joined by other devoted political bloggers.<sup>11</sup>

The April 6 Youth Movement leapt into prominence as a Facebook group in spring 2008 supporting a factory workers' strike in the Nile Delta city of al-Mahalla al-Kubra. Channelling the organising power of social media, the organisers called for a nationwide general strike in solidarity with strikers and as an act of civil disobedience against corruption, political stagnation, and economic hardships. The passive protest, which encouraged people to wear black, not to attend work or school, and abstain from shopping, was largely successful, although violent clashes between police and protesters erupted in al-Mahalla al-Kubra with several deaths reported.<sup>12</sup> The Facebook group became an active political discussion forum for a wide range of grievances against Mubarak's regime, becoming

Egypt's largest with more than 70,000 subscribers and articulating public opinion in a way that far surpassed what could be written in newspapers or discussed on television talk shows. The regime cracked down hard, arresting the group's creators, strike organisers, and online activists. Another general strike was organised a month later, on 4 May, to coincide with the president's 80th birthday. Employers threatened termination or docked pay for workers who did not show up to work, and this form of civil disobedience died down. Yet the April 6 Youth Movement did not.

Recognised by its clenched fist logo, the group continued its action online and on the streets. Activities of the group were closely monitored and organisers were routinely arrested and tortured by State Security. The mobilising efforts of the group – inspired by the non-violent political philosophy of Gene Sharp and the youth movement Otpor! that overthrew Serbian nationalist Slobodan Milošević – would be a fulcrum of popular revolution two and a half years later, paving the way for a legion of online and offline activists, thereby reducing the risk threshold of political participation.

At 10 am on 6 April 2010, two years after the start of the movement, the first text message was sent, calling on members of the April 6 Movement to take to the streets and loudly recite the national anthem. A second text message at noon instructed the crowds to move quickly and in groups to make their way towards the parliament buildings. They carried signs demanding democratic reforms. Once there, the protest rally lasted only minutes. 'We won't leave!' and 'Long live Egypt!' they bawled. Security forces and plain-clothes officers faced off against protesters in downtown Cairo and Alexandria, walling them in, breaking or confiscating mobile phones and cameras, assaulting journalists, and beating and detaining dozens.

New forms of resistance emerged, with several waves of sit-in protests. On a hot afternoon in late April 2010 wheelchair-bound Mahrusa Salem Hassan and her five-year-old daughter Noor camped outside the People's Assembly; it was the 46th day of their sit-in. For months she had lobbied officials for a kiosk, which would provide her and her family with a means of living, only to be met with shut doors. She sought a law to gain rights for people with disabilities and was joined by tens of other disabled men and women calling on the government to give them a helping hand. 'Why do you marginalise me?' she asked, addressing government bureaucrats unconcerned with her plight. 'Why don't you help me to be a person who is productive and useful, and not someone who feels alienated?'

She has had to wait. 'All these people have left me out of their calculations,' she said, adding that she does not feel this country is hers and does not know how to teach her daughter to love her country when deep inside she despises it. Sit-in protests in front of the People's Assembly became a common occurrence in the last year of Mubarak's presidency. The picketers, whether laid-off textile workers or real estate tax collectors demanding a payrise, often came in supplication; in the end they wanted to walk away with something. 'There is no one but our father, our father who is Hosni, the honourable president. There is no one better than him who can stand up for these people,' said Mahrusa.<sup>13</sup>

From student activism on public university campuses to rural inhabitants blocking a road demanding that clean water reaches their village, protest action has bravely taken place in defiance of five or six laws and risking varying prison terms. 'People are engaging in sit-ins without being too afraid that the penal code, or the emergency law, or the law of assembly, or the law of associations will be applied to them,' expressed Hossam Bahgat, a human rights advocate and executive director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights. 'It is not that the regime is allowing more rights that it did not offer before. There are differing levels of civil disobedience – sometimes bordering on suicidal – which challenge the current laws. If it succeeds, it motivates others to try it.'

The same experience held true for the private print and broadcast media, which gambled in crossing red lines until a new norm was established. And for protesters, the press was an important catalyst. Bahgat outlined:

*One, they know that the media is concerned with their movement and will transmit their voice. Two, they have seen on these same media outlets other people doing the same thing and that is why they are struggling to get their rights. Three, they have a desire to reach the media in order to achieve what they want. But what is most important is that they have greater confidence in themselves after the regime for years routinely destroyed the confidence people had in themselves and their ability to effect any change.<sup>14</sup>*

Activism and political expression against Mubarak's regime expanded to a greater extent on social media. Songs lampooning the social climate proliferated on Facebook and YouTube. Harnessing the social space, Egypt's underground rock and hip-hop groups delivered a politically

and socially aware message that got the young more involved. Social media have become a free space for ideas and political debate in Egypt, but the security-minded state intervened when it became a means to organise politically.

## Press restrictions

While portrayed as Egypt's larger than life father figure, Mubarak was no longer quite as untouchable as he once was by 2005, when the first contested presidential elections took place. The president was subject to more direct and unprecedented criticism in the press, where prior to 2003 denunciation of him was virtually unheard of. The independent *al-Dustur* (The Constitution), known for its adversarial and nonconformist approach, took the lead. The paper returned to news-stands on 23 March 2005 following a seven-year court battle to reinstate its publishing licence, revoked by the Ministry of Information. 'An American Magazine: Gamal Mubarak Owns a Company Worth 600 Million (Egyptian) Pounds,' announced a headline above the masthead of the 7 July 2005 edition. The Mubaraks' family wealth was not a subject previously discussed in the press.

Taking advantage of the freer boundaries, a 2006 edition of *al-Dustur* had a headline asking the rhetorical question, 'Is Hosni Mubarak a Dictator?': 'The size of powers granted by the constitution to President Mubarak – may God extend his life – and his successor makes us affirm, without sarcasm, that if a white angel with wings of silk ruled Egypt based on this constitution, he would immediately be transformed into a tyrant.'<sup>15</sup> A front-page article asked whether it was even possible to have free presidential elections when student union elections in universities were rigged. 'Who was the government afraid of?' asked *al-Dustur*. Alongside the question were three multiple choices: (a) the people; (b) the Brotherhood; (c) the Americans.<sup>16</sup> The press stood clear of directly associating the president with corruption.

In February 2004, Mubarak announced that the penal code would be amended to abolish prison sentences for journalists charged with defamation. It was not until June 2006 that Mubarak interceded with the speaker of the People's Assembly to strike a controversial article from the penal code amendments that would impose prison sentences on journalists who falsely accused public officials of corruption. Journalists still faced stiff fines and could be jailed for defaming the president.

The chief editors of four independent and opposition papers – Wael Elebrashy of *Sawt al-umma* (The Nation's Voice), Ibrahim Eissa of *al-Dustur* (The Constitution), Adel Hammouda of *al-Fajr* (The Dawn), and Abd al-Halim Kandil of *al-Karama* (Dignity) – in a case filed in 2006 by members of the ruling National Democratic Party all faced charges of slandering the president, his son, and key political leaders in the NDP, spreading rumours, and damaging Egypt's image abroad. In September 2007, a civil court ruled that the editors must pay 20,000 Egyptian pounds (\$3,540) each in fines, the maximum allowed by law, and were sentenced to prison for a year. On 7 October, a national holiday marking the start of the 1973 War, 22 independent and opposition newspapers did not go to press in protest at the government's action against press freedom. A Cairo appeals court on 31 January 2009 upheld the fines against the four newspaper editors but cancelled the one-year prison sentences.

In another case, Eissa was taken to court for spreading false rumours and harming Egypt's economic interests when he speculated about the president's ill health in a front-page column titled 'Gods Don't Get Sick.' 'The president in Egypt is a god and gods don't get sick,' wrote Eissa. 'For this reason President Mubarak and his associates and hypocrites hide the fact of his illness, leaving the country to feed on rumours and hearsay.'<sup>17</sup> Contemplating presidential succession and the power forces in play, Eissa goes on to say that the president's wife Suzanne is encouraging him to retire and transfer power to their son Gamal within his lifetime but the president clings to authority and wishes to remain in charge for as long as he can. Following an appeal, the court handed down a sentence of a two-month prison term on 28 September 2008, and when it was met with public outcry Mubarak commuted the punishment eight days later. In 1999 the rotund, moustachioed Eissa penned a self-published mystery novel staged in the corridors of presidential power called *Maqatal al-rajul al-kabir* (The Murder of the Big Man). He contracted with a state-owned publishing company to distribute 3,000 copies, which were quickly confiscated by State Security. The audacious whodunit circulated as underground literature before being republished in 2008.

But the firebrand journalist, whose columns were lauded for telling it as it is, would face what seemed like an orchestrated dismissal. In a battle of egos, Eissa was fired from *al-Dustur*, of which he was the founding editor, in October 2010 in a row with the paper's new owners, who objected to the publication of an opinion piece by democracy advocate Mohamed ElBaradei. In the article, ElBaradei noted that 37 years after the October

1973 War with Israel to liberate the Sinai, Egypt had not advanced politically or economically 'on the path to victory'; instead the nation had regressed. 'The October victory was a triumph of discipline and planning in work, which certainly represents the reverse of a culture of chaos and randomness known by Egyptian society after that,' wrote ElBaradei.<sup>18</sup> Eissa's hard-hitting nightly talk show *Baladna bil-masry* (Our Country . . . in Egyptian) on the satellite network ONtv, owned by billionaire telecom mogul Naguib Sawiris, was abruptly cancelled a month earlier, evidently due to pressures from above and ahead of parliamentary elections. Ibrahim Eissa has said that it was not enough for the government to fix elections; they did not want anyone to *talk* about fixed elections.<sup>19</sup>

### **Wider freedom within boundaries**

*Ra'is al-tahrir* (Editor-in-Chief), a current affairs and talk show by the outspoken veteran journalist Hamdy Kandil, was the boldest show to appear on Egyptian state television, running from 1998 to 2003, but the prerecorded show often featured jarring cuts. Kandil freely criticised American designs in the Middle East with war looming in Iraq, and pushed the boundaries of expression on state television. The programme featured his review and commentary of the Arabic and foreign press. He numbered each press clip so viewers would know when television censors had deleted items. Kandil left Egyptian television when he felt the heavy-handed censorship violated his principles. His show moved to private Egyptian satellite channel Dream before it went off the air when the presenter refused to tone down his outspoken commentary.<sup>20</sup>

A popular interview programme broadcast on state-owned television with a mildly critical perspective of businessmen and government officials was *Min qalb Masr* (From the Heart of Egypt) hosted by Lamis al-Hadidi,<sup>21</sup> who worked as a public relations adviser in Mubarak's presidential campaign. She is the wife of Amr Adeeb, scion of a family media and entertainment conglomerate who has his own talk show on Saudi-owned Orbit satellite television, *al-Qahira al-youm* (Cairo Today), and is known for his self-styled populism that is often loud and aggressive. Amr Adeeb's brother, Emad Eddin Adeeb, the oversized chairman and CEO of the Good News Media Group and the presenter of *'Ala al-hawa* (On the Air), was given an exclusive interview with President Hosni Mubarak in the run-up to the 2005 presidential elections. The rare one-on-one interview with the president,

broadcast in three episodes on state-owned Channel One, was meant to portray the ageing ruler as a man of the people.<sup>22</sup>

With such vested interests at stake, it seemed apparent that complimentary programming was only allowed to go so far. In October 2010, Amr Adeeb found his popular talk show off the air for broaching the delicate subject of a safe exit strategy for the president. The official reason given was unpaid bills to majority state-owned Media Production City, where *Cairo Today* had its studios. As a general ally of the regime who took a few jabs at government officials every now and then, his departure had a chilling effect for other broadcasters.<sup>23</sup>

Dream TV, owned by Egyptian businessman Ahmed Bahgat and launched in November 2001, became the first private Egyptian satellite channel. Enjoying cosy relations with the regime, Bahgat was able to secure huge loans from public sector banks to establish manufacturing ventures, a theme park, and Dream TV. When he fell out of favour because of programming on his channel that was considered disparaging to the presidency, public sector banks recalled his loans, forced him to sign away his holdings, and seized a controlling stake in his business enterprises. He was prevented from leaving the country and only allowed to travel to Atlanta in 2007 for a heart transplant by special permission of the president. While recovering in intensive care Bahgat was forced to sign an amended agreement with the banks or risk having all his assets held in escrow.

Bahgat's Dream TV caused a stir in the closed political system, especially through its popular night-time programme with presenter Mona al-Shazly called *al-'Ashira misa'an* (Ten at Night), which broadcast interviews with policy-makers and politicians that included challenging questions about Egypt's social and political realities. Talk shows like *Ten at Night* gained loyal audiences of Egyptian viewers in a sea of free-to-air satellite channels. While private Egyptian satellite channels have played a significant role in connecting with the man on the street, the government and its security agencies have had ways of pressuring producers and presenters, or more pointedly, the channel's owners, who are businessmen with interlocking interests with the government.

An expanding press landscape has broken the cast of conformity characterising regimented, authoritarian societies, where any form of dissent is decidedly not encouraged. The multi-layered complexity of political discourse has emerged. Arabic satellite television introduced topics for discussion that would never have made it onto state-run television, breaking rules, flaunting conventions, and taking audiences

along for the ride. But that freedom was never unfettered. 'It can give the impression of freedom without boundaries, which is not true. We all know this. During times of crisis we discover red lines linked with the politics either of the station's financing or the hosting country,' said Naglaa El Emary, programmes editor at BBC Arabic. 'From time to time, it becomes apparent.'<sup>24</sup>

Within the larger media world made possible by satellite communication and the internet, the state's role in shaping what Egyptians see has shrunk considerably. Add to that the fact that Egypt's role politically, culturally, and economically has eroded in recent decades. 'In reality, Egypt will not achieve the role it had played in the world and regionally,' remarked Hussein Abdul Ghani, Al Jazeera's Cairo bureau chief. 'The cultural influence was one of the sources of power for Egypt – the soft power of Egypt was its journalism, its intellectuals, its books, and its cinema industry.'<sup>25</sup>

Al Jazeera charted new ground in covering political news and opened the floodgates for free and open political discussion. Al Jazeera commanded audiences not only with news but with investigative documentaries and popular interview and debate programmes. State media around the Arab world, by comparison, could no longer hold on to their once dominant position. By losing hegemony of the broadcast image, they no longer had the same tools to mould public opinion.<sup>26</sup>

The Arab public holds a high degree of distrust of the government press, said Abdul Ghani at his office in downtown Cairo, where on the wall panel behind his desk hung the calligraphic teardrop emblem of the Qatari news station. 'The independent press has won ground so you can expect that there would be a resistance, then a regression and suppression.' Abdul Ghani and his staff have been arrested and detained on dozens of occasions. They have had video equipment broken and footage confiscated. 'The harassment increases during times of crisis,' said the Cairo bureau chief, 'when the government feels that the critical spirit of independent press coverage is pressing on its nerves.'

And there was much to hide from the scrutiny of the press. 'Each time a journalist is pushed away it is an attempt to avoid exposing new corruption. Each time the press is pushed away it is a way of hiding an illicit association between a businessman and a minister,' said Abdul Ghani. 'Each time the press is pushed away the more it reduces the chance of there being free choice to elect representatives who will hold the government accountable.' The government has used heavy-handed attempts

to control the imagery that comes out of Egypt and restrict the actual practice of journalism on the streets.

## Power and the press

The primary function of censorship has always been political, asserted novelist Alaa Al Aswany. Religion and social morality, he said, are used as convenient covers by authoritarian regimes, serving to preserve their power and shield them from criticism. The authorities did not consider an author's connection with his readers to represent a significant threat, added Al Aswany. 'They fear and place restrictions on television. The viewership of some programmes reaches 40 million.' This, he argued, is a shortsighted and erroneous measurement since effecting change does not necessarily correlate with the numbers of people being influenced. 'If I galvanise 30,000 readers among the intellectuals, I can change the whole country. It is not necessary that I reach a large number.'<sup>27</sup> That was a lesson lost on Egypt's British occupiers. In the late nineteenth century, agent and consul-general Evelyn Baring (Lord Cromer) gave the press generally free rein not out of a sense of benevolence but because he felt it was essentially harmless since only a small minority of Egyptians were literate. With a burgeoning nationalist press clamouring for an end to foreign rule, the British administrators of Egypt would eventually come to regret that decision.

While official state media served the useful function of shaping public information in the past, its credibility has eroded in a more open media space. In an odd language of contradiction, Egyptians believed the opposite message of what was being reported in the state press. 'When the government says there are no summer diseases, it means that there is an outbreak of cholera,' Al Aswany explained. With public denials by Gamal Mubarak, including a prime-time interview on state television's Channel One on 28 March 2006 stating that he was not interested in the presidency, Egyptians knew the stage was being set for the former investment banker to succeed his father. While the elder Mubarak also dismissed the notion that his youngest son was being groomed to be the head of state, he kept the vice-presidential post vacant.

Facing competition from a vibrant and expanding independent and private press, the state media's flagship daily *al-Ahram* saw its circulation and reputation diminish. The president and an ever-youthful first lady were for a long time front-page fixtures of the main state-owned dailies

and the government perspective was given the benefit of the doubt. News items seemed oddly sanguine. Each day lauded the initiation of a new factory and the job opportunities it would create, even in the face of high unemployment. The common retort was that it was the newspaper of another country.

The blogosphere expanded the arena of expression for traditional media in addition to serving the complementary role of being a media watchdog. *Al-Ahram* famously and embarrassingly doctored a photo taken at the September 2010 Middle East peace talks in the resort city of Sharm al-Sheikh to have Mubarak leading the troop of world leaders; behind him were US President Barack Obama, President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority, King Abdullah II of Jordan, and Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. In the original photo, Mubarak was trailing the pack.<sup>28</sup> The gaffe was discovered by an Egyptian activist and blogger, dispersed on social media, and quickly made headlines around the world.

'*Al-Ahram* as it stands now under editor-in-chief Osama Saraya can be studied in media schools as an example of failure. The Ministry of Interior dominates *al-Ahram* from A to Z. Maybe the only section that it does not control are the obituaries. That is an area where the Ministry of Interior cannot lie,' Al Aswany said before the 25 January revolution, citing the running joke on what can be trusted in the state-owned print media.<sup>29</sup>

The newspaper's headline on 4 May 2010 – Mubarak's 82nd birthday – was, 'A Day Egypt Was Born . . . Anew'. Saraya penned a sycophantic and laughable front-page column titled 'The Maker of the Future', lauding the achievements of the president in 'building a modern Egypt'. 'Today, political life is organised and freedom flourishes throughout the country, and every Egyptian man and woman experiences the freedom to participate and write and say what he or she wants in all issues of the homeland without fear or hesitation,' wrote *al-Ahram's* chief editor, who goes on to mention other glowing accomplishments. The global economic crisis 'has not affected a single Egyptian', 'a strong country has stood by its citizens and children amid the escalating crises', and implemented programmes 'to root out poverty'. 'Each day, Mubarak handles the large battles for change in the lives of Egyptians,' enthused Saraya.

*Do not forget to wish him happy birthday on this grand, beloved day. We tell him with our hearts filled with joy at his recovery following treatment,*

*when he returned to work tirelessly, internally and externally, to maintain Egypt's prestige, its central role in the interest of all brotherly Arab states of preventing war, restoring peace, and building the nation.*<sup>30</sup>

## Let them bark

A confluence of factors accelerated the creation of a wider space for an independent press, particularly from 2004 onwards, giving room for dissidents and critics of the regime to express their opinion. What Egypt used to have before then was a government press and a loud, noisy, and scurrilous opposition press that often lacked true credibility. New print arrivals presenting a strong challenge to the state-owned media came on the scene. With the existence of a private press, a much larger middle ground opened up where Egyptians sought to know what the truth was – not by just demagoguery but by actually looking for sounder facts. Movements on the street like Kifaya took on a deeper role, openly railing against the décor of political reform and voicing trepidation in the run-up to the first contested presidential elections on 7 September 2005, where Hosni Mubarak faced off against nine other challengers and won 88.6% of the vote, according to the official count. Combine that with increased pressure from the administration of George W. Bush for Egypt to at least make the appearance of moving towards reform, even as the US was aiding violations in human rights through its notorious renditions programme and proxy CIA prisons, which made Mubarak's cooperation particularly useful.

Mubarak's reluctance to implement political reform was well known to his American ally, which delivered billions in aid to an 'ossifying and increasingly out of touch' regime. 'In all likelihood, it will not be possible to make great progress on democratic reform as long as President Mubarak remains in office,' asserted US ambassador to Egypt Francis J. Ricciardone Jr in a 2006 embassy cable. 'We do not have a silver bullet, but we can press reforms that will lead, inexorably, to the "death by 1000 cuts" of Egypt's authoritarian system. There will be no "Orange Revolution on the Nile" on Mubarak's watch, but we must aim to consolidate each modest democratic advance.'<sup>31</sup>

Evening talk shows and news magazine programmes were where most Egyptians got their news and information. They had replaced the basic function of the local evening newscast on state-owned terrestrial channels, which led with a story about the president (even if something as mundane

as his telephone conversation with another world leader), prime minister, or top-ranking government official, reported a factory opening or other ceremonial occasion, and quickly moved on to cover news outside Egypt.

Mubarak's government had the means to pressure the private press. There are ways to teach outspoken journalists a lesson, too. They include arrests, beatings, prosecution, travel restrictions, being monitored and having phone calls tapped by the security agencies, or by having allies of the regime tie up journalists in expensive and time-consuming court cases. Journalist Abd al-Halim Kandil, known for his caustic editorials against Mubarak and the regime, was abducted in November 2004 in front of his home, beaten, stripped naked, robbed of his wallet and thick spectacles, and left on a desert road. 'So you'll stop talking about the big guys,' he was told. Yet the treatment did not deter him; his 2009 polemic was titled *Kart ahmar li-L-ra'is* (A Red Card for the President).<sup>32</sup> Some media professionals were up for the challenge of battling against forces of entrenched power, others were not. Journalist Andrew Hammond expressed it this way: 'For journalists, it's a game of daring an official mindset that rules by instilling fear of its ability to strike at any time. Many decide that cohabiting with and being co-opted by the authorities is the better part of valor.'<sup>33</sup>

Security agencies often got involved in the affairs of the press through hidden means, becoming what Abd al-Moneim Aboul Futouh, who was a prominent figure in the opposition Muslim Brotherhood, called the 'security press':

*The security press is a number of journalists in different places, some of them are editors-in-chief of state-owned publications. Their role is to be an instrument of the security agencies. The security agencies use them to harm a political opponent, to defame his reputation, or to injure an organisation like the Muslim Brotherhood. I call this group the security press, the press that gets its instructions from the security agencies, that does not practise the function of media and journalism as professionals – neutral, honest, clean.*<sup>34</sup>

The state-owned press routinely referred to the Muslim Brotherhood as the 'banned group.' Egyptian television blacklisted opposition figures. Even as the secretary-general of the Arab Medical Union, Aboul Futouh was prevented from appearing on Egyptian television to talk about purely medical matters. The barrier of allowing Brotherhood members airtime

to defend their views was broken first by Al Jazeera and occasionally by private Egyptian satellite channels.

The Egyptian regime exerted a firm level of control on forms of political expression, particularly through the state's one-million-man-strong security apparatus. 'EGIS [Egyptian General Intelligence Service] Chief Omar Soliman and Interior Minister [Habib] al-Adly keep the domestic beasts at bay, and Mubarak is not one to lose sleep over their tactics,' described a US Embassy cable.<sup>35</sup> A freer press has been called 'the right to scream' or 'the right to bark,' but when Egyptians attempted to organise politically, the security state cracked down. While 'freedom to talk' expanded, 'freedom of action' had its limits. 'So you can criticise, give the opposite opinion, accuse the authorities, and question their legitimacy,' described Gamal Ellatif, strand editor at BBC Arabic. 'But when it comes to action on the ground then it is met with negative consequences. They call it the freedom to vent (*tanfis*), not the right to implement (*tanfiz*). So say what you like but do not implement what you say.'<sup>36</sup>

While the press in the last years of the Mubarak presidency was allowed a wider space for criticism, that did not end rigged elections or promote true political reforms. 'What is worst is the lack of responsiveness,' contended Awatef Abdel Rahman, professor of journalism and mass communications at Cairo University. 'The private and opposition press uncovers corruption and the government does nothing.'<sup>37</sup> That sentiment was echoed by Aboul Futouh. 'Criticism of the executive branch has no value if it is not followed by action. We don't have free expression in Egypt; we have the right to yell.'<sup>38</sup> Take any number of issues that have been heated topics of discussion, he continued. Ultimately nothing has happened to change the realities on the ground. 'There is no response or solution to most chronic problems. So what's the value of expression? Is it a form of venting? Psychological help? Is that going to be the goal? If its role is psychological, it should be played out at the doctors' offices and not in the press.' To have a noticeable impact, the right to free expression needs to diffuse all levels of society, including the street, posited Aboul Futouh. 'What will lead to change is popular action.'

Alaa Al Aswany entertained no illusions about literature's ability to bring about change. 'The function of literature is not to change the political realities in Egypt or anywhere else,' said the novelist. 'Literature is not a political strategy. If you want to change the political reality, be involved in activism.'<sup>39</sup> Al Aswany's literary and political salons used to take place in downtown Cairo cafés, but when the owners were pressured by the

security agencies not to host the gatherings, they eventually moved to a crumbling building, home to the opposition Karama (Dignity) Party, in the Cairo district of Munira. A dentist by profession, Al Aswany has penned regular political articles, where he advocated democracy, human rights, and the rule of law to replace an authoritarian system that favours those with power, wealth, and connections. He ended his columns with the words, 'Democracy is the solution.'

In one opinion piece in the independent daily *al-Shuruk* (Sunrise) published in April 2010, Al Aswany recounted the history of the Iranian revolution and how its ruler had become completely oblivious to how his people were living. 'The dictator lives in complete isolation from the life of his citizens and does not truly know what happens in his country . . . but only its image, transmitted to him through reports raised to him by the different intelligence agencies.' It is in the interests of these agencies to shroud the truth so as not to receive the dictator's wrath, Al Aswany continued. He linked the example of the shah of Iran's detachment with the ruler of his country.

*What do you think President Mubarak knows about what happens in Egypt? Does he know that more than half of Egyptians live below the poverty line? Is the president bothered that millions of Egyptians live in slums without access to water, electricity, or sewage? Is he distraught by the spread of unemployment, poverty, disease, and hopelessness? Does the president know that Egypt has sunk to the bottom in all fields? Did he hear about the poor who die waiting in queues in search for loaves of bread or propane gas canisters? Has he heard about the boats of death through which thousands of youth try to escape despair and are found drowned at sea? Has anyone told the president that thousands of wage earners and their children lie in protest for months on the sidewalks before the People's Assembly because their lives have become unbearable? Has President Mubarak thought of the employee who earns 100 Egyptian pounds a month to spend on his whole family when a kilo of meat has reached 60 pounds? I really do not know how the president thinks. And were I to guess, according to the phenomenon of the isolation of the dictator, President Mubarak is completely detached from the reality of what is happening in Egypt.<sup>40</sup>*

Al Aswany concluded his column by calling on the president to end his years of rule with true democratic reform, and amend the constitution to allow for honest competition between candidates and transparent

elections that allow citizens to choose representatives who will end Egypt's ordeal.

It was these sorts of hard-hitting and widely read columns that forced the authorities to take action, closing a paper factory belonging to newspaper publisher Ibrahim al-Mu'alim because of alleged safety violations. The message was clear: stop publishing Al Aswany's columns. State Security officers routinely called al-Mu'alim after the articles appeared in the paper and warned him there would be consequences. Al Aswany refused to tone down his criticism of the president and the ruling clique, and submitted his resignation to *al-Shuruk* in October 2010 after al-Mu'alim's factory was shut down a second time. Al Aswany was willing to pay the price for his words, but he was not prepared to have factory workers or the owner suffer in his place.<sup>41</sup>

Even as the state cracked down on the media, an Egyptian public became more informed, public debate was heightened, and there was an expectation of hearing different perspectives and viewpoints. 'It is one area where there really has been quite deep reform with profound impact. It is not a matter of having a few more-or-less independent newspapers with pretty good circulation,' added Max Rodenbeck, the Middle East bureau chief for *The Economist*. 'There is a sense of airing grievances. This is presumably a part of government policy to let things open a little bit. Cynics would say that the policy is to let people shout just to let off steam but I think there had been a very marked widening of the circle of freedom of speech.'<sup>42</sup>

## **A political challenger arrives on the scene**

Coming together via the power of networking, thousands of Egyptians crowded the terminal at Cairo International Airport awaiting the arrival of the former director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency and 2005 Nobel Peace Prize winner Mohamed ElBaradei in Egypt on 19 February 2010. Supporters waved banners and posters declaring ElBaradei 'The Hope of Egypt', cheering with nationalistic slogans, and singing the national anthem. They came to express their support for ElBaradei's vision for greater democratic representation, a respect for human rights and the rule of law, and an end to the corrupt authoritarianism that has long defined Egyptian-style politics. His arrival from Vienna – and the Egyptian people's reaction – was reported

around the world. The regime was caught off guard, unaware exactly how to handle this public relations nightmare.

‘Mr ElBaradei is also fortunate that one of the few chinks in the armour of Mr Mubarak’s state is a relatively free press,’ *The Economist* opined shortly after his arrival in Egypt. ‘Despite a flood of innuendo and calumny from regime mouthpieces, independent newspapers and television channels have given the newcomer a fair hearing.’<sup>43</sup> Egyptian presenter Mona al-Shazly conducted a live three-hour-long interview with ElBaradei on 21 February 2010. ‘My party is the people,’ proclaimed the democracy advocate. ‘I don’t have a government or an army. I have a thought.’ Egyptians, he said, were alienated from political life, feeling that elections were nothing more than a staged performance. Since 1952 a vanguard rooted in the military had held sway over Egypt’s political destiny. ‘It is time we talked about democratic validity,’ he said, adding his common refrain that ‘poverty is the biggest weapon of mass destruction.’<sup>44</sup>

The control the state had over the media was seen with coverage of the regime’s latest liability. As an emerging political contender, ElBaradei’s access to the media would be severely restricted. ElBaradei’s campaign, called the National Coalition for Change, began on 4 December 2009 when the recently retired chief of the UN’s atomic energy watchdog announced that he would consider running for the presidency in his native Egypt if political reforms were made to open the political process to greater participation and transparency.

Through the coalition’s website and in door-to-door canvassing by volunteers, Egyptians were invited to sign a seven-point petition that demanded an end to wide-ranging powers granted to the state by emergency law, complete judicial supervision of elections, monitoring of elections by civil society and international non-governmental organisations, providing equal opportunities in the media for candidates, enabling Egyptians abroad to exercise their right to vote at Egypt’s embassies and consulates, ensuring the right to stand in presidential elections without arbitrary restrictions, and constitutional reform. ElBaradei’s petition drive resulted in more than one million signatures. His courage in criticising the lack of democratic representation earned him a following, one he nurtured through regular postings on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.<sup>45</sup>

Mubarak’s Egypt was careful about who shared the political limelight and government office holders who seemed to be gaining admirers were promoted out of influential posts and eventually their stars faded. That served to entrench the idea that there was no one, save

Hosni Mubarak and his son and heir apparent, who had the experience to lead a country as large and complex as Egypt. Loyalists in the state-owned media and the business elite around the president's son doggedly promoted the notion of dynastic succession as the safest course for Egypt.<sup>46</sup>

The regime had always made the case abroad that democracy has to progress at a snail's pace since no ally wants the Islamists ushered into power. The time is not quite right, they maintained, for true representative democracy with free and fair elections. That was an argument that British agent and consul-general Lord Cromer had advanced during the era of monarchy a century earlier: 'It is absurd to suppose that Europe will look on as a passive spectator whilst a retrograde government, based on purely Mohammedan principles and obsolete Oriental ideas, is established in Egypt,' he wrote in 1908 in a two-volume history titled *Modern Egypt*. 'The material interests at stake are too important, and the degree of civilisation to which Egypt has attained is too advanced, to admit of such a line of conduct being adopted.'<sup>47</sup>

Aside from a series of interviews about the need for democracy and signatures gathered on a petition, ElBaradei did not succeed in generating a movement for change that Egyptians could latch on to and the initial euphoria that met his arrival largely dissipated. Taking frequent trips abroad, he had been reluctant to go beyond rhetoric and do the real work of grass-roots mobilisation that was needed to bring about change.

Political challengers were also up against insurmountable obstacles. 'The security agencies are what rule Egypt. The criminality and the intervention of the security corrupt any act of reform,' said Muhammad Mahdi Akef, the former supreme guide of Egypt's most organised political opposition, the Muslim Brotherhood. 'We are not able to resist neither the military nor the security.' Sentenced to death during the reign of Gamal Abd al-Nasser, Akef spent the next two decades in prison. In 1996, under Mubarak's rule, he received a three-year sentence handed down by a military tribunal. Before the revolution, he said:

*ElBaradei is someone with integrity, who has an international reputation. The likes of ElBaradei are many; hundreds are like him. But they do not succeed in accomplishing anything. And ElBaradei won't succeed in doing anything because the political will of the military and security does not want this to happen. If the regime has the political will, then everyone will cooperate for change, and the best methods of*

*change. Change can work if the nation is united behind a core concept and one set of demands.*<sup>48</sup>

It looked unlikely that ElBaradei or any other challenger would be able to replace an entrenched authoritarian system with one that was more democratic, but it meant the regime would have to work overtime to weather the electoral cycle in 2010 and 2011. In street demonstrations and online campaigns, activism expanded as much as the security state would allow. These organised efforts calling for genuine political change lacked the infrastructure of a party and embraced a rejection of an increasingly unpopular system. Even the security agencies were hard pressed to handle formations that were essentially leaderless and represented more or less a collective will for something different.

The 2010 parliamentary elections, a harbinger of what could be expected in the 2011 presidential race, laid to rest the hope that gradual democratic reform was in the offing. With the security apparatus as accomplices, Mubarak and the ruling party intended to secure a tighter grip on power. Full supervision of elections by Egypt's judiciary, the only hope for a semblance of fair elections since international observers were not permitted, came to an end with amendments to the constitution in 2007. In June 2010, the National Democratic Party won 80 of 88 contested seats in the Shura Council, the upper house of parliament, amid claims of vote buying, voter intimidation, and election rigging. Another 44 seats were allocated by presidential decree.

The outcome was no different in elections for the People's Assembly five months later, which guaranteed the ruling party a landslide win. Candidates of the Muslim Brotherhood running as independents, the largest opposition bloc in the outgoing People's Assembly with 20%, received no seats in the first round of voting on 28 November 2010 and boycotted the runoff elections on 5 December. Maintaining its political dominance, the National Democratic Party won 420 of 508 seats in the People's Assembly amid allegations of fraud. With calls for reform gaining momentum, the state began tightening systems of control over the media in a run-up to elections. State Security determined who was allowed to appear as a talk show guest and who was not. In a 12-minute message posted on YouTube following the parliamentary elections, ElBaradei warned, 'If we must, we will resort to civil disobedience', adding that violence may be the inevitable result of a system unwilling to change. 'There are limits to oppression. And if repression persists, we must know that there will come a day of reckoning.'<sup>49</sup>

## Social media breaks walls

An often-used word of advice to avoid trouble with the authorities was to 'walk close to the wall' – which meant to have nothing to do with anything political. Many Egyptians have internalised that message, choosing to play it safe if they did not want to find themselves in the stranglehold of the security agencies. That psychological barrier began to fall as more Egyptians, particularly internet-savvy youth, sought a political voice. Yet change required a critical mass willing to act and to shed their fears. Social media opened up an arena for political engagement and activism that was having a slow yet transformative effect. Protesters were using mobile phones to stream live footage of political action on the street to the web and to document police abuses. More than being a forum for expression, the internet was being used to monitor and coordinate protests and grass-roots organising. That was evident in a police brutality case that roused outrage against the long-standing emergency law in an unruly police state.

Khaled Muhammad Said was a 28-year-old man beaten to death by plain-clothes police in a cybercafé in Alexandria on 6 June 2010. Graphic photos of Said after his death surfaced on social media, bloodied, disfigured, with a broken jaw and teeth. His death marked a tipping point, and in a matter of days his image was the symbol of national anger against the all too common practice of police torture – a bleak reminder of how the state treats its citizens. The official narrative given by the authorities for Said's death was that he died of asphyxiation when he swallowed a bag of drugs after being apprehended by police.<sup>50</sup>

Facebook expanded the community of online advocates. Postings and shared links were read or watched by an audience that far surpassed many print publications in numbers and influence. Protests and demonstrations followed, including silent vigils on Fridays staged on the corniche in Alexandria. Many Egyptians changed their profile picture on Facebook to an image of Khaled Said with a banner that read, 'Martyr of Egypt'.

The dynamic of the conversation generated online could not be ignored by broadcasters, who had previously been cautious about broaching topics like police corruption and abuse. On 13 June 2010, as the outrage over the beating to death was picking up steam, presenter Tamer Amin gave the Interior Ministry's version of events on the popular evening current affairs show *Masr al-naharda* (Egypt Today) broadcast on state television's Channel Two. 'Everyone tells the story he wants. I am not against any narrative, but I am against a judgement before investigation,'

he said. 'From actual records of the Interior Ministry, this youth, Khaled Sobhi Said,<sup>51</sup> 28 years old, is a criminal and has a police record. He has four convictions, four court cases,' explained Amin as he kept count by motioning with his fingers. 'First, evading compulsory military service. Second, carrying a switchblade. Third, sexually harassing a female. Fourth, attempted robbery using force.'

Amin continued with the official line: when Khaled Said saw the police he ran, swallowing the drugs. 'The forensic pathologist verified that the cause of death was asphyxiation. The bag of marijuana was lodged in his trachea, resulting in him choking. No oxygen was passing through his air passage, so he died.' Amin advised that there should not be a rush to judgement before the public prosecutor had completed a review of the case, but called the police's version of events 'more logical'.<sup>52</sup> Because of the force of social media, the murder remained in the headlines for weeks, even attracting international media coverage, finally pressuring prosecutors to bring charges against the two policemen responsible for Said's death.<sup>53</sup>

The programme *Egypt Today*, in a segment in October 2010, sounded the alarm bells on Facebook, a harbinger that the regime had intentions of reining in the social networking site in the name of national security. Tens of thousands of members massed on the pages of the April 6 Youth Movement and 'We are all Khaled Said' – forums not only for debate but activism – have made Facebook a threat to the security state.

'We have to take a stand and talk about the defects of Facebook,' said presenter Mona al-Sharqawy, who acknowledged that she did not have a Facebook account. 'They can use your personal information for other purposes – the information they know from what you write, the groups you join,' she added. 'They can take it and use it to other ends.'

The presenter took the discussion into more treacherous ground. 'I am also talking about the political danger. As I said in the introduction, intelligence agencies are financing Facebook. Many of you don't know this,' alleged al-Sharqawy. 'We are scandalising our country. And if you allow me, some groups are inviting protest and sabotage,' she continued. 'How do we know that the ones telling them to do this are not Egyptians? It could be someone foreign. We have seen it more than once. We have seen it with April 6. We cannot deny that it was a sabotage operation – they were instructed to go out and vandalise Tahrir Square.'

Foreign intelligence outfits were not the only rogue elements behind social networking, according to the presenter. Democracy promotion was

another danger. 'It was said about two months ago that Facebook will start funding democracy in countries and especially in countries entering elections, and of course we are entering elections,' announced al-Sharqawy.

'I hope you have absorbed every word we have said today,' the presenter told her audience at the programme's conclusion. 'I speak to all with an open heart,' she said of the information revealed about Facebook. 'On the social level, the results have shown that it is detrimental. They know personal details about us, and they play with it, abuse it, and threaten us with it. On the political level, it is enough for us to say that behind the funding are intelligence agencies. I urge each mother and father and youth who are mature and alert to be extremely careful when they deal with this system and that they do not coordinate with people who incite them in matters that can endanger their country.'<sup>54</sup> In an age of digital communication, the technology gains of immediacy, decentralisation, and magnitude are the censorship authority's Achilles' heel.

## **The Jasmine revolution**

With ever-rising prices, limited employment opportunities, political dissatisfaction, and a strong will to act, more and more Egyptians were becoming politically engaged. In the dusty and crowded streets of Cairo, there was an unsettling feeling of suffocation, malaise, and frustration. So much needed to change: corruption was not only common, it was encouraged; a huge polarisation of wealth existed, with most Egyptians living on the margins of existence. Add to that the shadow of fear – that anyone could be picked up by the authorities, randomly (for being in wrong place at the wrong time) or on purpose (to silence dissent), and subjected to all manner of abuse. Despite all that, people were speaking up in ways they had not done before, armed with social networking tools that made it unacceptable to sit on the sidelines.

The world watched and waited as demonstrations in neighbouring Tunisia reached a crescendo, bringing down the autocratic regime of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. The protests erupted after 26-year-old vegetable seller Mohamed Bouazizi doused himself with a flammable liquid and set himself ablaze outside a local government building on 17 December 2010 in the provincial town of Sidi Bouzid after authorities publicly humiliated him and confiscated his vegetable stall, his only means of livelihood. Dying of his burns 18 days later, Bouazizi emerged as a martyr to Tunisians who

took to the streets protesting against high unemployment, the lack of political freedom, nepotism, and rampant corruption, notably among members of Ben Ali's family, a quasi-mafia known to live wildly extravagant lifestyles. Strong press censorship kept stories of familial profiteering from being publicised or acknowledged.

News of unrest in Tunisia originated not from the local press or traditional media organisations, which were barred access in a country that heavily restricted press freedoms, but were disseminated on social media despite attempts by the state censorship apparatus to restrict online activity. These testimonies of the ongoing clashes on the streets between security forces and protesters were curated by the media, particularly Al Jazeera. One desperate act by a young man would become the event that set off a month-long uprising in Tunisia that toppled the country's 23-year reigning president, whose promises of comprehensive reforms came too late. 'I heard you. I heard you all, the unemployed, the needy, the politicals, and those who demand greater freedoms,' a tense and shaken Ben Ali intoned in a final televised address on 13 January, one day before he and his wife fled Tunisia. 'I have decided on complete freedom for all forms of media, an end to closure of internet sites, and a refusal of any form of censorship on it, mindful of our morals and the principles of the journalistic profession.'<sup>55</sup>

The events of Tunisia's Jasmine revolution emboldened activists and reformers in Egypt as 2011 turned out to be a watershed year for Arab states. Some pundits were predicting that Egypt would be next. 'Egypt, in particular, seems to bear at least a passing resemblance to Tunisia – a heavy-handed security state with diminishing popular support and growing demands from an educated, yet frustrated, population,' observed Anthony Shadid in the *New York Times* on the day the Tunisian president fled the country.<sup>56</sup>

In a 2008 meeting with assistant secretary of state and former US ambassador to Egypt David Welch, Ben Ali shared his insights on where the region was heading: 'He opined that the situation in Egypt is "explosive," adding that sooner or later the Muslim Brotherhood would take over.'<sup>57</sup> Totalitarianism across the Arab world, long known for its monarchs and presidents for life and their ironfisted rule, did in fact make the region explosive, and the spark of what would be called the Arab Spring was set off by Tunisia's popular revolt. 'What happened in Tunisia over the past three weeks is little short of a revolution whose domino effect many in Egypt hope will not only touch the banks of the Nile, but the capital cities of the entire Arab world,' Rania Al Malky began her editorial in the English-language *Daily News Egypt*, where she was chief editor.

*Ironically, all the events that led to the Tunisian uprising are daily occurrences in Egypt. . . . Why then do we not sustain the momentum of our protests – which have sadly become like withered embroidery bordering the patchwork of Egypt’s so-called democracy? And when Egyptians do come together in modest numbers, why then does the regime not feel obliged to make fundamental reform, satisfied that protestors will welcome the bread crumbs it offers as major victories? . . . [T]he Tunisian upheaval . . . has shown us that it is no longer a choice between civil wars or military coups.*

*There is a third option and the Tunisians are leading the way.<sup>58</sup>*

That editorial got the attention of the state’s censorship authority, which has offices right next door to State Security. ‘For the first time in six months, I got a call from our friends at the censors,’ said Al Malky. He told her they had not had coffee in a while, then got to the point. ‘He said what you wrote was incitement,’ she recalled. ‘We had this short and brief five-minute conversation where his message came across very clearly.’<sup>59</sup>

Anything that made direct links between Tunisia and Egypt was seen as risky in the eyes of the minders. Since the developments in Tunisia, the platoon of state media publications bent over backwards to portray the government as being truly concerned with the plight of the people. Lip service aside, the government was not offering up a modicum of genuine reforms that would indicate that they were at all concerned.

Mubarak was the only president that every Egyptian under 30 years of age – two-thirds of Egypt’s population – had ever known. But, as Egypt had so often seen in those three decades, political change was only choreographed by the president himself. He was a man who operated with unbelievable caution. Yet the status quo, which neglected too much of Egypt’s population, was unsustainable. Social networks and a renewed sense of activism awakened a force for change that on 25 January 2011 reached breaking point.

EXTRACT

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