

REMEMBERING ARAB SPRING: EGYPT IN THE TIME OF REVOLUTION

The Spokesman-Review is spotlighting Egypt – the place, people and culture – as Spokane readies to welcome the Egyptian men’s national team ahead of the 2026 FIFA World Cup.





HOLLY PICKETT/FOR THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW Protesters remove a large poster of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak from a building on Ramses Street on Jan. 28, 2011, in Cairo. Tens of thousands of people took to the streets after Friday prayers, demanding Mubarak step down. Demonstrators clashed with police through day and night as they marched toward Tahrir Square.



HOLLY PICKETT/FOR THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW Thousands of soccer fans march on Feb. 2, 2012, from Al-Ahly football club grounds to Tahrir Square in Cairo. Al-Ahly football team fans were attacked at the end of a match in Port Said, leaving 74 dead and hundreds injured.

BY HOLLY PICKETT FOR THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

On Jan. 28, 2011, I stood outside the Al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo. Members of the Egyptian and ex-pat press corps chatted nervously while we waited for Friday prayers to finish and for the Day of Anger to begin.

A camera hung off each shoulder; extra batteries, notebook and pen were in a waist pack. I had a phone, too, but it was useless – Egyptian authorities had severed

internet access and phone services earlier that morning.

A low rumble emanated from inside the mosque. It grew to a roar.

“Ish-shaab yureed asqat an-Nizam!” The people want the fall of the regime!

Egyptian police attempted to block the exits, but it was futile. People poured into the street, joining those from other mosques and homes already marching toward the aptly-named Tahrir – or “Liberation” – Square downtown.

Egypt, a land of rich cultural and historical importance and a critical political bellwether, embarked on a revolutionary journey amid the Arab Spring. Egyptians ready for change succeeded in deposing a dictator, but they couldn’t bring down the authoritarian system.

My time there, documenting momentous change, was brief. And it changed my life.

When I arrived in Cairo in January 2008, President Hosni Mubarak was approaching his third decade in power, and there was no indication – from the outside, at least – that he’d ever loosen his grip. The pro-democracy protests that started three years later, though, would not only lead to Mubarak’s resignation, but would affect millions of people and transform the region.

I was an early-career photojournalist at The Spokesman-Review when I decided to leave my job at the paper and move to Egypt.

Propelled by a life-long curiosity about the world and an interest in North Africa and the Middle East, my plan was to give freelance photojournalism a go. Egypt seemed safe, I reasoned – led by an autocrat, but stable.

It had to be, I thought, with so many millions of American and European tourists visiting each year.

The U.S. government treated Egypt like a major ally, providing more than \$1 billion per year in military and economic aid in the years leading up to 2011, according to the Center for Global Development. ×

Egyptian authorities played “democracy-lite,” giving the appearance of a not-so-bad autocracy. This meant granting official press accreditation to

independent Egyptian and foreign media outlets and journalists, tolerating a bit of dissent, critiques from a few human rights organizations and holding regular national elections.

Internally, Egypt was a police state. The Amin al-Dawla, or State Security, could indefinitely detain anyone deemed a threat.

Under the emergency law, Egyptians faced disappearance, torture and horrific prison conditions. A 2011 Human Rights Watch World Report found youth activists and political opposition figures regularly disappeared into a system of secret jails, held incommunicado from their families and attorneys, only to resurface months later and publicly “confess” to the crimes with which they had been charged.

Maybe this is why – from the outside – Egypt looked so calm, so stable. But Egypt was simmering.

The global economic crisis of 2008 led to rising costs for Egyptians, millions of whom lived on \$2 or less per day.

By April 2008, in protest of rising food costs, textile workers in the Nile Delta town of Mahalla al-Kubra planned a strike. It was crushed by hundreds of police. Egyptian journalists recalled how rare and unexpected it was to see such public, headline-grabbing opposition. The April 6 Youth Movement grew out of that strike, becoming a key group that would mobilize the protests at the beginning of the Egyptian uprising.

In June 2010, Egyptian police beat to death a 28-year-old computer programmer, Khaled Said, while arresting him in the Mediterranean port-city of Alexandria. Photographs of Said’s disfigured corpse went viral. A Facebook group founded after Said’s death called “We Are All Khaled Said” became a rallying point for outrage about police brutality, corruption and impunity.

Months later, Egyptians voted in parliamentary elections marred by reports of intimidation and irregularities instigated by Egyptian authorities and security forces. Egypt’s ballot box did not appear to offer a road to democratic change.

Large swaths of the population – workers, pro-democracy youths, opposition political and civil society groups, regular people – had reached a breaking point in a system where they had few political or civil rights.

A growing cadre of activists took to social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, to rapidly disseminate information and organize action.

All of this might not have tipped into revolution had it not been for Tunisia. On Jan. 14, 2011, Tunisians ousted their own autocrat via organized street protests.

President Zine El Abedine Ben Ali resigned and fled the country.

Eleven days later, on Jan. 25, 2011, Egyptian youth activists called their countrymen to peacefully march in a protest against corruption, unemployment and police brutality. The date was no accident – it was Police Day, an Egyptian national holiday celebrating the accomplishments of the police.

I remember thinking, “There is no way – NO WAY – a revolution will happen in Egypt.” Egyptians had a right to fear their leaders and the security forces that kept them in power.

But something had shifted.

On that day a throng of chanting protesters blocked the street. I photographed the growing crowd as more people joined, filling four lanes of traffic across Ramses Street. Rows of police blocked the exit of the Lawyers’ Syndicate, so the lawyers waved Egyptian flags and cheered from the roof of the building to the demonstrators marching below toward Tahrir Square.

Hundreds of young, black-clad riot police awaited the marchers. I’ll never forget the worried looks on the faces of those policemen when the demonstrators pushed past the metal barricades. The police used tear gas; demonstrators answered with stones. Eventually the violence abated, and protesters stayed put. For the next couple of days, Egyptian authorities attempted to quell the protests.

They made hundreds of arrests, dispersed protesters and closed Tahrir Square on Jan. 27.

But by this time Egypt’s largest and most organized opposition group, the Muslim Brotherhood, had entered the cause. It was the Brotherhood that called for a yom al-ghadab, or Day of Anger, to begin after Friday prayers.

Jan. 28, 2011, is the day police were overwhelmed and deserted their posts. It's the day the tide turned toward real uncertainty. The protests continued for 18 days, and Mubarak clung to power.

Through state-run media, Mubarak and his ruling party tried to turn public opinion against the protesters.

They blamed the protests on the tried-and-true enemies of Egypt: the Muslim Brotherhood and lurking foreign saboteurs – in this case, Western spies and the Qatari-owned Al Jazeera news channel.

This made journalism – and being non-Egyptian – increasingly difficult and dangerous. One morning while photographing food markets while a colleague reported on the protests' affect on food prices, a woman suddenly started screaming that we were from Al Jazeera.

She grabbed my colleague, and a mob formed around us. People tried to pull my cameras from my body, forcefully holding my arms, and shouting. Worse physical assault felt like a possibility, but a couple of people intervened. In Egypt there's always at least one person trying to help.

We were pulled into a deserted police building and held until a pair of uniformed police arrived. This wasn't the first time I had been "citizen-arrested" in Egypt, but it was the most frightening. After calming the crowd and checking our Egyptian press credentials, the police pretended to detain us, drove a few blocks away, and let us go.

Meanwhile, thousands of demonstrators occupied Tahrir Square. People erected tents and volunteers manned ad-hoc checkpoints at the main entrances to ensure nobody brought weapons to the sit-in. Egyptians traveled to Cairo from other towns to visit the square.

Savvy young people rigged electricity and internet access.

The mood varied – joy, rage, pride, wonder, suspicion.

Sometimes it had the feel of a street fair or music festival; other times, the air was heavy with tension.

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The Egyptian Army also maintained a presence, ostensibly to keep the peace.

Seen as protecting the sit-in from pro-Mubarak counter-protesters and

State Security, sit-in leaders and occupants welcomed the soldiers and their tanks.

That the military represented a powerful arm of the ruling elite seemed to briefly be overlooked.

Mubarak resigned on Feb. 11, 2011. I surmised that if Egyptians could rid their country of a dictator, anything was possible.

Following Mubarak's ouster, the military – specifically the Supreme Council of Armed Forces – stepped in, promising to shepherd Egypt toward a democratically-elected civilian government.

Open, free, and fair elections were allowed, but the military never relinquished power. In hindsight, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces' involvement was a “coup in the guise of democracy,” as described by historian Zeinab Abul-Magd in a 2012 essay.

The activists realized too late that the democracy movement was at the mercy of Mubarak's generals.

The Tahrir sit-in didn't end; it seemed like the only lever the revolutionaries had – loud but reasoned mass public protest, this time against the supreme council and military rule.

The time of revolution in 2011 and 2012 turned Egypt inside out. Every Friday, Tahrir overflowed with public sermons and Friday prayers. The sit-in became the rallying point for marches to the nearby Interior Ministry, Cabinet and Parliament buildings.

Sometimes clashes with the police erupted. Sometimes citizens of Cairo would awaken to find a street leading to a government building walled off with enormous concrete blocks, like a giant came in the night and forgot to pick up his Legos.

Pro-democracy activists used these walls and others as a canvas for witty and profound street art.

If the ever-present vigil in Tahrir or the walls cutting residential streets in two didn't suggest the fragility of Egypt's revolution, then the breakdown and – in some cases, complete absence – of security might. Episodes of tremendous violence peppered life inside and outside the square.

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One of the most devastating of these occurred when 74 young people were killed and hundreds more injured in a stadium riot after Cairo-based Al-Ahly Football Club played a soccer match in Port Said on Feb. 1, 2012.

Witnesses said police stood by while Al-Ahly “ultras,” the name for soccer fans in Egypt, were attacked by ultras of the opposing team.

Cairo’s Al-Ahly ultras and Zamalek ultras were early participants in the 2011 uprising.

Protests erupted in Cairo following the stadium massacre, with families and friends of the victims asking if the bloodshed was political retribution.

In June 2012, Egyptians elected Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party as the country’s first civilian president. A year later, Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi orchestrated a coup d’etat, dissolving Egypt’s new constitution and placing Mohamed Morsi under house arrest.

By June 2014, al-Sisi was president. He’s been in power ever since. Al-Sisi has overseen one of the darkest periods for press freedom, human rights and civil liberties in Egypt’s post-colonial history. The Egyptian state has criminalized dissent, public protests, academic inquiry, reporting it doesn’t like, and, in some cases, even providing legal representation for the accused.

Since 2014, thousands of Egyptian civilians have been tried and sentenced in mass trials held in military courts.

I left Cairo for Istanbul in January 2013. Though I have returned a couple of times, I mostly have watched as journalists I know and youth activists I photographed – and many, many other thinkers, bloggers, lawyers, human rights advocates and others – have disappeared into Egypt’s prison labyrinth, held without charge for years before being sentenced to lengthy additional prison terms.

According to Reporters Without Borders’ annual World Press Freedom Index, Egypt now ranks 169th out of 180 countries for press freedom. The Committee to Protect Journalists currently ranks Egypt as eighth in its annual survey of the world’s worst jailers of journalists. The same report ranks Egypt as third, behind Israel and Iran, for mistreatment in jail. But Egyptians haven’t stopped speaking out for civil liberties.

Fifteen years later, even in this time of darkness, the spirit of the revolution lives.

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