

On "Leaderless Revolutions" and the Fall of Mubarak

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"Leaderless revolutions," as seen currently in North Africa, pose important challenges to outside media and to foreigners, generally, seeking authoritative voices to clarify the picture of fast-moving events. But genuine revolutions are made from below, with the myriad energies and objectives of hundreds of thousands or millions coalescing at least around certain fundamental demands. Time-constrained and impatient foreign journalists and audiences, dependent on fast analyses by the usual hierarchical menu of "experts" and political leaders, naturally resist an arduous process of grassroots inquiry.

Yet it is at the grassroots level and not simply in the media focus of Tahrir Square where the intense frustration, despair and rage has accumulated for years. It is not the more abstract models and formulas of the political class that provide the essential building blocks of genuine revolution from below.

It is the slowly-accumulating momentum of hundreds of thousands of confrontations with local officials and elites, the organizing efforts of mutual assistance (including even Egyptian soccer clubs, as Dave Zirin points out), individual and group assertions of women's rights, tireless attempts to solidify common stands of workers against bosses (as in the great waves of strikes in the textile city of Mahalla), students' rejection of authoritarian school conditions, and efforts to defend local neighborhoods—almost always in the shadows out of sight of foreign media—that slowly develop the courage, confidence and essential horizontal networks bubbling below the surface of seemingly fixed political landscapes.

The sense of solidarity and community (and at least some partial small-scale victories) from local contexts gradually expands to awareness of similar struggles elsewhere and personal ties of trust and common objectives. At these local levels, responding to daily oppressive contexts, it is the individual decisions—often spontaneous—to resist instead of submit, small revolutions at the personal and community level, that accumulate over time into deeper and deeper determination to challenge ever-broader elements of the existing regime. Essentially, these are the true "leaders" of the revolution.

Without that growing accumulation of willful resistance by hundreds of thousands already at the grassroots level, no appeals by Twitter or Facebook, by liberal, radical or revolutionary organizations, or by charismatic national figures will inspire millions to risk the bloodshed and torture

implied in confrontation with the harsh face of the regime's police. Without large numbers already willing to take such risks, the hundreds of thousands or millions of previous bystanders would not dare to then express their own deeper feelings of alienation, resentment and rage. In turn, at a certain stage, the open use of repression by the regime, as with the pro-Mubarek thugs last week, simply fuels even greater rage and mass participation. When suddenly massive resistance declares itself in huge demonstrations, participants experience an unparalleled exuberance of community and utopian egalitarianism. These are the sentiments we've heard commonly expressed in Cairo and other cities in Egypt. These are the same feelings experienced in Paris in 1968, in Prague in 1989 and other revolutionary contexts. Even in non-revolutionary situations, as in the great civil rights and antiwar marches of the 60s in the United States, the same festive atmosphere of great hope and solidarity could be felt.

While the human face of the oppressive regime—as Mubarek in Egypt, Ben Ali in Tunisia and Bouteflika in Algiers—is despised with good reason on its own, such targets also symbolize a wide and deep range of grievances that extend from national-level organs of the state and military down to local-level daily humiliations of officials' contempt, bosses' exploitation, mistreatment of students and women's exclusion from the workplace and political life. These are the larger realities of the existing "regime" of oppression. And this much larger dimension of grassroots revolution poses a whole other question of "leadership." When certain "spokespeople" for the movement or independent "power brokers" become fixed in place—encouraged by negotiators for the old regime or by the media or by their own self-promotion—it is doubtful that those deep levels of revolutionary aspirations will be heard. This will be a key dynamic to watch in Egypt in the weeks to come.

When only the head of state like Mubarek, his cabinet, his ruling party or a few military leaders are discarded, when even a constitution is re-designed or replaced to allow greater representation, such changes rarely go deep enough to affect the realities of oppression in people's daily lives. Understandably, there is genuine immediate relief from previous regime brutality and an opened atmosphere for free expression. These are great accomplishments by the Egyptian people. But if the hierarchical logics of capitalist economics, liberal democracy, dominant foreign powers and social exploitation such as sexism remain in place, a political revolution has only partially succeeded. Much of the old regime remains. Those millions of Egyptian "leaders" who have tasted the exuberant possibilities of utopian community, however briefly, will now confront the realities of resuming their long resistance struggles for lives of freedom and dignity.

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