Cairo Rewind

The first two years of Egypt’s revolution
2011–2013

by Azza Radwan Sedky
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The cover graffiti, by El Teneen, appeared on the wall of the AUC Library, adjacent to El Tahrir Square. The chessboard exemplifies the state in Egypt during the Revolution. On one side, the soldiers, aka the people, remain strong—with no leader. On the other side, the king is down; though his system is still up, he has no followers.

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For
Effat, Maged, and Noha
Introduction

This book began as a personal blog written on my annual winter trip to Cairo. As a professor at Capilano University in Vancouver, Canada, good luck and careful planning allowed me to teach during the summer and autumn semesters in order to spend several winter months in Cairo each year. From the mid ‘90s, I flew to Egypt in mid December and stayed way into March. The main purpose of these trips was to be with my aging mother, who passed away six months after the revolution began. And so I was lucky to be in Cairo in January 2011 to observe the Revolution as it unfolded.

Once I completed my BA in ‘68 at Ain Shams University, I hopped on the first plane to follow my husband-to-be overseas, but I always managed to go back to Egypt for months on end. I went back to complete a Master’s degree and a Ph.D. and to deliver both my children, but I knew I was going back for the love of Egypt.

Put most simply, I just love being in Egypt. Cairo life in particular remains very close to my heart. The liveliness, the bustle, the socializing, and the late evening get-togethers, the energy and stamina, the powerful love of life—all seem to me uniquely Egyptian, and to enter that world of joy and challenge takes me into the heart of who I am.

I grew up in a moderate Cairene family. My father was an academic while my mother dedicated her efforts to the family. I attended, as did my brothers, one of the few coed schools in Egypt then—the English
School, an elite British school. I received the best of educations by any standard. In my teens, I worked through my university years; led an open and broadening life, mingled and socialized with all. It was an open society then where Cairenes enjoyed clubs, mixed gatherings, and liberal thinking.

Going back to Egypt for months each year, I see the gradual changes in Egyptian society—the way you notice a change in a niece’s or nephew’s height and development when you see them only once a year. In the fifties and sixties, for instance, the concept of being scarved was foreign to all Egyptians. Today most Muslim women in Egypt wear headscarves. The change is just one of many signs of a society becoming more and more restrictive and less permissive of the rights and freedoms that Egyptians once took for granted.

And so I was in Cairo throughout the Tahrir Square protests. I wrote long emails to friends overseas and in Canada, and soon began a blog—*Egypt, Om El Donia*, “Egypt, Mother of the World.” I sent one piece to *The Tyee*, a Vancouver on-line news outlet. It began as a skeptical look at media reports from Cairo that January. The euphoria, then the frustration, and later the doom and gloom, all motivated me to continue to write. It turned out to be a rollercoaster ride. Little did I know then that this would be the start of another career, that of a writer.

I write because events and how they are reported disturb, puzzle, and confound me. All the articles collected in *Cairo Rewind* were born from the incidents and events around me. They are dated, so readers can see the day-by-day or week-by-week development of Egyptian history as events developed. Explanatory notes in italics precede, and sometimes supersede, some of the articles, for readers not familiar with exactly what happened when and, at other times, to shed more light on a particular event.

These articles are a personal take on events and on how they were reported in the media—how ordinary people in Cairo experienced Tahrir Square during the first 18 days and subsequent happenings. This of course is very different from the often sensational, and frequently agenda-driven, reports in the mainstream media.
The articles are arranged chronologically, giving the reader a choice to either zero in on a particular happening, or read the whole as a historical sequence. A timeline of events in the last two years precedes the articles, and a glossary of terms and abbreviations and a list of key players follow.

However, because the articles are written while the events are occurring, they may predict an event that doesn’t materialize or circumstances that simply change course. I believe the reader will understand this as a logical consequence to writing while events are taking place.

For ease of reading, I’ve clustered the articles into sections. The title of each section may not accurately lend itself to all the articles included. Too many events intertwined and crisscrossed, so that a single section title may not do credit to all the article topics discussed.

The question of where to end the book was difficult. I had hoped to end *Cairo Rewind* on a positive note, to conclude that the revolution had led to a major change that would uplift all Egyptians. This did not happen. So the ending is placed after an arbitrary two-year span, and events continue to unfold in dramatic fashion throughout the Middle East, with the involvement of Egypt. Anticlimax it may be, but this is in itself a reflection of how things are in Egypt as I write today.

I must thank a few supporters. First, thanks go to Crawford Kilian for being my inspiration, mentor, blog tutor, and the help desk to all my digital queries. I must also thank him for setting me on this path. Thanks to Leslie Savage for encouraging me to chronicle my reflections then becoming my copy editor, and for being a true friend. Without Crawford’s and Leslie’s support, this book might never have materialized.

I must also thank my blog and Twitter followers. Their encouraging words and positive input were the force behind my persevering.

Last but not least, thanks to Nourah for rejuvenating me and giving me the drive to continue.
Timeline

2011


January 28—“Friday of Rage” protests escalate in Cairo, Suez, and other cities. Internet services shut down.

January 25 to February 11—The more clashes occur between the police force and the protestors, the stronger and more determined the protestors become and the higher the bar of demands goes. A week into the protests, the protestors call for the ousting of Hosni Mubarak. By February 11, over 800 Egyptians had died in clashes with the police.

January 31—Ahmed Shafik, Minister of Civil Aviation, is sworn in as the new prime minister. Omar Suleiman, ex-intelligence chief, becomes Mubarak’s Vice-President, the first deputy in Mubarak’s era, and an adjustment Tahrir demanded.

February 2—The Battle of the Camel ensues, leaving 11 dead and over 600 injured. Protestors persevere.

February 10—Mubarak transfers powers to Vice-President Suleiman.
Timeline

February 11—Mubarak steps down and a military council, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), led by Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi takes over.

March 3—Prime Minister Shafik resigns and SCAF asks former Transport Minister, Essam Sharaf, to form cabinet. The protestors, still in Tahrir, approve of Essam Sharaf.

March 19—Referendum on amendments to the constitution. Egyptians approve the referendum.

April 8—Thousands protest in Tahrir Square against delays in putting Mubarak on trial.

April 17—Mubarak and sons are summoned for questioning over allegations of corruption, abuse, and torture.

June 28—The Balloon Theatre clashes—theatre destroyed and many injured.

July 24—The Abbasiya clashes, 296 injured

August 3—Mubarak; Alaa and Gamal Mubarak; Al Adly, ex-minister of Interior; and six of his subordinates face trial.

August 17—the Egyptian/Israeli stand off—Egyptian border guards killed as Israelis chase cross-border raiders into Sinai.

September 9—Protestors storm the Israeli Embassy.

September 25—Field Marshal Tantawi testifies in Mubarak’s trial.

October 9—Maspero clashes; 27, mostly Coptic Egyptians, die when troops break up the protest.

November 21—Essam Sharaf’s government resigns after more protests in Tahrir Square against the slow pace in transition period.

November 25—Biggest turnout in Tahrir since Revolution; SCAF names Kamal Al Ganzouri as Prime Minister; Tahrir denounced choice.

November 28—First voting in parliamentary election

December 17—Mohammed Mahmoud Street clashes—over 40 Egyptians die. Mohammed Mahmoud Street is adjacent to Tahrir Square and houses the Ministry of Interior’s headquarters.

2012

January 3–4, 2012—Final round in parliamentary election. Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party takes more than two fifths
of the seats, followed by the Salafi Islamist party, Al Nour Party, with 20%. Liberals take 15%.

January 23—New parliament holds its first session.

February 1, 2012—Port Said Football stadium massacre—over 70 young Egyptians die.

March 17, 2012—Egyptian Coptic Pope Shenoudah dies.

April 17, 2012—Ten candidates disqualified from the presidential race, including Omar Suleiman, ex-deputy president; Muslim Brotherhood’s Khairat al-Shater; and Hazim Abou Ismail, the El Nour candidate. Mohammed Morsi becomes the Muslim Brotherhood choice for the presidency.

May 23 and 24, 2012—Egyptians go to the polls to choose president.

May 28, 2012—Morsi and Shafik declared the runoff candidates.

June 2, 2012—Mubarak sentenced to life in prison for his role in the killing of protesters; his sons, Gamal and Alaa, acquitted.

June 14, 2012—Supreme Court rules to dissolve parliament, two days before the runoff presidential election.

June 16-17, 2012—Second round of presidential election.

June 30, 2012—Dr. Mohammed Morsi becomes Egypt’s first civilian president.

August 2, 2012—Hisham Qandil forms first cabinet in President Morsi’s administration.

August 5, 2012—Seventeen Egyptians die at the Israeli/Egyptian border as gunmen attack an Egyptian checkpoint.

August 16, 2012—Morsi retires Field Marshal Tantawi, appoints General Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi.

September 13, 2012—Anti US protests erupt after a US-filmed movie about Islam and the Prophet Mohammed appears in the public domain.

November 4, 2012—Bishop Tawadross II succeeds Pope Shenoudah as Egypt’s Coptic Christian Pope.

November 22, 2012—President Morsi publishes a decree that gives him authority over all other legislative powers. Morsi dismisses Prosecutor General.
November 27, 2012—Huge turnout in Tahrir and at presidential palace to denounce Morsi’s decree; clashes between Islamists and moderates ensue, several Egyptians die.

December 9—President Morsi annuls decree.

December 15 and 22, 2012—Constitutional referendum vote—64% say yes to new constitution.

January 25, 2013—On the second anniversary of the Jan 25th Revolutions, demonstrations ensue in several cities around Egypt.
Overturning a regime

Who decides how Egyptians think?
February 2, 2011

This post was picked up by The Tyee, an online Vancouver news outlet, and as the protests heated up, the editors of the Tyee encouraged me to continue.

The picture on the national Egyptian channel is of Cairo during curfew. The streets are empty except for tanks and armed vehicles. Cairo is indeed deserted—a very unusual sight for a bustling, chaotic, car-jammed city. Sometimes the television screen is divided to reflect the empty streets on one side and the looters and pillagers who have been caught on the other side. Other times the picture is of the armed forces in a protective mode—a very eerie sight but comforting nonetheless.

Change channels and watch Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, or even CNN, or BBC, and the screen content changes. The scene is from Tahrir Square where thousands of Egyptian protestors are standing their ground calling for change. No depiction of the armed forces doing their job, of people abiding by the curfew, or of the looters getting caught.
On all channels, the vivid wow scene becomes the most notorious, the one watched most closely, be it of a pro-Mubarak gathering, or of protestors holding an explicit banner denouncing Mubarak, or of a fallen victim lying in his blood. It depends which channel you watch. Dramatic scenes are repeated again and again even days after the event has come and gone. Folks exclaim, “Is this happening again today?” They don’t really know if it is a rewind or a new event.

One can easily see that agendas change dramatically within different circles. As the days pass, the Egyptian National TV begins to show the scene in Tahrir Square, but from afar. It also begins to show the pro-Mubarak scene—those who are asking the protestors to calm down and see if the promised changes will occur. The other channels are still stuck on Tahrir Square, talking to protesters, estimating the numbers, and assuming them to be in the millions.

Indeed, Al Jazeera began urging Egyptians to remain strong and to continue their mission. It spoke to the opposition, with would-be leaders such as Al Baradei or Amr Moussa, and with the protestors in Tahrir, but it was adamant in not showing the ordinary Egyptian—the one trying to return to normalcy. Al Jazeera also focused on shortages of bread, gas, and cigarettes of all things, a shortage I have not seen personally.

Egyptians have a saying, “John Doe wants a funeral where he can scream and shout.” I’ve heard this many times in the last week from regular Egyptians describing the media, in particular television channels. The meaning is clear: the media are focusing on the negative to ignite anger; in other words, normalcy does not sell or bring in viewers; the norm has no return. It is a given in what we know about the media, but never has it been so vivid.

I’ve never seen a scene depicted so differently. All TV channels are portraying sides or versions of the truth but simultaneously making choices of emphasis that are crucial in the final versions, the ones that reach Egyptians and the outside world. And since Egyptians have been glued to the TV screens, and with curfews limited to 3 p.m. as well as the Internet out of commission, these different final televised stories have been playing havoc with the emotions of all Egyptians.
Is the media deciding how Egyptians think? Is the media fanning a revolt and playing a crucial role in making fundamental decisions that can indeed make or break a country? Do folks take these scenes as a given or with a grain of salt? Do some channels, Al Jazeera, for instance, have hidden agendas?

Egyptians lived in a censored society in Nasser’s time. In my twenties, I used to receive my letters—romantic ones from my husband-to-be—from abroad, opened and sealed with a printed note, “opened by the censor.” And since my husband-to-be was quite outspoken, we were often followed during our outings around Cairo.

That was then, but similar memories remain ingrained in the Egyptian mentality. Now, and during the last 15 years in particular, and with the sudden openness to the world via satellites, channels galore, plus the Internet, Egyptians are free to choose and evaluate what they see. But do they? Are they equipped to sift through the news and weed out the bias and prejudice? Is this influx of information playing a positive or negative role in their lives?

The result is that Egyptians are living in a torrent of conflicting words and visuals, often contradictory. The bombardment is ongoing. There seems to be a great propaganda game in play. My hope is that the Egyptian people are not going to be the losers in this mayhem.
Early on during the revolution, Internet and text messaging were cut off. Egyptians, including me, were furious. This was an action that Mubarak lived to regret.

In Cairo, I'm provoked to write by the conversation I have just had with my daughter in Vancouver. Midway through the call, she said, “Now that the Internet is back up again in Egypt, it is shocking to see how different the comments on Facebook are.” This is very true. Friends, classmates, colleagues, peers, and people from the same sects and backgrounds are not thinking alike. How can that be?

Listening to the protestors’ demands, and also to all the prominent figures speaking out and condemning Mubarak, you would think that all Egyptians must be thinking in a similar fashion. “Mubarak must go,” they exclaim. Listen to the pro-Mubarak group, and you would do a double flip; “Mubarak must stay,” they exclaim. Are these people talking about the same leader? If so, what makes these people so different?

I haven’t been to Tahrir Square and have limited my goings and comings quite dramatically since the curfew was imposed. However, I’ve been immersed in the happenings: talking to tradesmen and cab drivers,
Overturning a regime

watching and listening to the news extensively, and analyzing family and friends’ take on events. Also, I happen to know Egyptians well.

One can draw the following conclusions. Some of the protesters in Tahrir Square are young and educated. Many of them speak perfect English, which means they went to good private institutions. Their sound education strengthens them and makes them capable of articulating their concerns. They are strong in their demands. Then again the middle class, the family-oriented, and the ordinary Egyptian are represented, in Tahrir Square, but in fewer numbers. However, very few older people in their fifties, sixties or seventies are found amongst the protesters.

Then there is the pro-Mubarak group. These represent the older Egyptians, the poorer Egyptians, the moderate Egyptians, and the easy-to-reason-with Egyptians. And they also represent many religious leaders—whether Muslim or Christian—prominent society figures, artists, and film stars. But most importantly they represent those who fear for their lives and for their belongings.

In the last few days, these Mubarak supporters have watched looters ransack stores and loot malls. They have seen the destruction of hospitals and police stations. They have also watched their sons stand all night in front of apartment buildings to protect their kin upstairs from similar dangers. They don’t want to lose what they had worked hard to build, be it a property, a business, or a simple but decent livelihood. They don’t want a ruined Egypt. And now they are scared.

And I don’t blame them. I’ve watched them spend many nights guarding apartment buildings, worried that looters would come after their most treasured possessions and their families. Who wouldn’t be worried?

Many working Egyptians are employed on a day-to-day basis. In Egypt, tradespeople don’t belong to unionized companies or associations. They work for themselves, so they wait to be called on every day to do a particular task. These groups have not worked for 10 days and have had no source of income for that long. Others wake up in the morning, head to the local coffee shop and wait for a contractor to call
on them for a day’s job. These again have not worked in 10 days. And they are scared, too.

This group, Mubarak’s supporters, may not care for Mubarak that much; they may even believe that Mubarak has overstayed his welcome, but they care for the good of Egypt more than they care whether or not Mubarak steps down. This last group is in the millions—I would estimate them to be the majority and not the minority.

The bottom line is that the protesters have legitimate demands, but they are not Egypt; they are a voice amidst other voices.

Where does this scenario take Egypt? It’s anybody’s guess. And this is why this article is outdated already. It is 11 a.m. on Friday morning. In two hours’ time, the Friday worshippers will leave thousands and thousands of mosques. They don’t need to head to Tahrir Square to voice their concerns or shout their support to this group or the other one. They need to step outside the mosque to face opponents.

If Egypt is lucky, then those in the mosques today will be moderate. If Egypt is lucky, they will leave the Tahrir protestors alone and not go after them with a mob-like mentality. That is only if Egypt is lucky.

If Egypt is not lucky, a clash of human beings and a clash of ideologies will prompt a spiralling downfall. This is a no-win situation. Both groups will ultimately lose.

I really hope I’m wrong in my dire predictions, and I wish it were not a matter of luck.

Soon afterwards, Egyptians from all walks of life joined the Tahrir protestors.
What do Egyptians want now?

February 6, 2011

Eleven days into the revolution, and I’m still calling it an uprising. Tahrir is becoming stronger. The conclusion is interesting and raises the question: when is enough enough?

It is overcast—not too common in Cairo. A few specks of rain hit the windowsill. Safia then puts her hands up towards the sky and says, “God, let it pour, so they get drenched and go home.” Safia, my mom’s caregiver, is 62 and illiterate. She recognizes numbers and calls on her cellphone—that is the extent of her literacy. However, she seems to be voicing the sentiments of many Egyptians. A downpour would disperse the protesters in a way that would still keep them safe. No one wants them harmed, but many want them to disappear.

The Tahrir Square protesters are indeed wet this morning. Whether the few specks of rain will deter them or not remains to be seen. Many are still joining the square anew to spend the night or attend a Sunday mock-up mass. To many others, it is an honour to say that they have been to the Square. It has become a good outing; many families turn up with their children and their picnic lunches to experience the square.

Late in the evening on February 1, Mubarak gave a speech where he promised to step down, vouching to work for Egypt, and vowing
never to leave Egypt. This speech won Mubarak the sympathy of some protestors, and they began to leave the Square.

But on February 2nd, pro-Mubarak supporters on camels and horses attacked the protestors in Tahrir. The Battle of the Camel left 11 dead and hundreds injured, and it backfired, leaving the protestors more willful and more resilient.

Today, protestors, when spoken to promise not to leave the square until Mubarak steps down—a stronger demand than what they started off with. They also promise to stay put until those who bludgeoned the peaceful demonstrations are prosecuted. And in spite of what they have achieved, or maybe because of it, nothing seems to appease them.

Politically, the protesters have succeeded in achieving more than activists, parliamentarians, political parties, and the Egyptian nation as a whole have achieved since Nasser’s regime almost 60 years ago. The achievements cannot be belittled or taken for granted.

First and foremost, they moved Hosni Mubarak to state clearly that he will not run again. A vice-president has been named, and laws regarding electing the president will be changed. And most importantly, key members of the ruling party have resigned, including Gamal Mubarak. These are all achievements no one can deny. And Egyptians are ecstatic and very proud of those whom they call the “Tahrir Youth.”

But what do the Egyptians want now? Most Egyptians just want peace. They want to go back to work, make money, and feed their households. They want to return to normalcy. And this is happening slowly but surely. And with the curfew limited further, people are moving about more freely and beginning to go about their businesses.

Yesterday the plumber who hadn’t worked for ten days came and fixed my mother’s gas boiler; the clinic on the first floor of her apartment building opened its doors, and the doctor saw his patients; the drycleaners delivered the clothes wrapped and spotless; and the vendor with his cart full of vegetables buzzed me to let me know that he had succulent blood oranges. None of all this would have happened two days ago. Signs of returning to normal life? Absolutely.

But the scene that suggests a return to normal in every sense of the word was the wedding that took place in the church around the block.
True the wedding was at 2 p.m., a very unusual time for weddings in Egypt, but, with the curfew starting at 7 p.m., it had to take place earlier than normal. But the festive mood was hard to ignore: shrills filled the air, cars honked and jammed the street, and celebrators flocked around the bride and groom.

Today the streets are again packed with cars, and what aggravates people on a daily basis—traffic jams—is met with smiles since it essentially means life is on the mend.

And the jokes are flying all around. If you know Egyptians, you know that they deal with crises by laughing them off. Humour is part and parcel of how Egyptians live. One protester in Tahrir Square held a banner that said, “Please go soon; my arms are hurting.” A Blackberry message reads: “A student’s message to protesters: All the happenings in Tahrir Square will be on the history mid-term, so please make it short.”

A final joke says, “Now that the protesters are gaining ground and succeeding, they will go against Tunisia in the semi-finals.” Then Safia begs God for rain; a great people, right?

My fear is that this extraordinary uprising will lose its momentum as Egyptians change channels and begin watching Oprah on MBC4 or the Turkish soap operas on CBC2. As far as many Egyptians are concerned, the uprising has already succeeded and ended.
The morning after

February 12, 2011

This was written a few hours after Hosni Mubarak stepped down—a joyous day indeed. Egyptians thought that this was it; everything will be fine now; little did they know.

It’s the morning after and the street below is very quiet—it’s only 8 a.m., and by Egyptian standards, it is extremely early. As I look down from my balcony in Heliopolis, the street below is deserted and quiet. Egyptians will sleep in today since everyone is exhausted and drained. They partied throughout the night after 18 days of anxiety and aggravation—and after decades of fear and discontent through out many previous regimes as well as the one now in defeat.

Late in the evening on February 11, Omar Suleiman, the Vice President, appeared on National TV and in a brief, abrupt announcement, told Egypt that Hosni Mubarak is stepping down. You could hear the street suddenly come alive with cheers and applause. Finally, the long-awaited moment became a reality.

What was accomplished had been deemed highly unachievable, almost unimaginable. The people, not the army, succeeded in ousting
their president. The people wanted change and they got it. By all standards it is a success story.

The Tahrir youth started this move, but even they had no real hope that this could be the result. They dreamed on but believed the realization of their dream highly unlikely. Then it grew beyond their expectations into a full-blown revolution. And the more the regime erred and aggravated them, the more they persisted.

The “Facebook” youth, as they are also often called here, started it, but yesterday, Tahrir Square reflected a cross section of all Egyptians—men and women, young and old, rich and poor, and educated and illiterate.

Earlier on two groups had emerged: the anti and the pro-Mubarak. The difference between these two groups is a fine line, although at face value they seem so starkly different. In all fairness, both groups wanted Mubarak to leave, but the pro-group wanted Egypt’s safety more than Mubarak’s resignation. They were worried about the country and where it was heading. If they were to choose between having Mubarak leave and total chaos, which is how they expected things to end, millions would have chosen to keep Mubarak. However, once he made the decision, the pro-Mubarak group was overwhelmingly relieved. And so they partied with all fellow Egyptians.

And the party was a joyous, jubilant one. It lasted throughout the night with no one heeding the curfew. Cairenes celebrated by coming out to the streets chanting national songs and filling the air with festive shrills. They honked their car horns and waved thousands of Egyptian flags. People took photos of one another on tanks, and soldiers on armed vehicles picked kids up and hugged them for Kodak moments. Euphoria reigned.

Egyptians were known to be complacent and accepting, not caring to pursue a cause or validate a right; very few voted and generally everyone found a way to avoid adhering to the law, especially traffic laws. But today, they have proven everyone wrong. It seemed as though their dreams and hopes were attainable after all. Now, everything will be all right. Today, Egyptians believe that with Mubarak gone they can do wonders.
They can fix the failing systems, education and medical. They can overcome corruption, deception, and market monopoly. They can defeat *wasta*. *Wasta* is networking but in a negative manner. If you have *wasta*, you can get things done. If you have *wasta*, you will get the best job while someone who doesn’t have the same privilege, but may have even better credentials, would get nothing.

The expectations these persevering youths have of themselves, their fellow Egyptians, and the country as a whole are quite amazing. The first Facebook message circulated today said, “Meet at noon in Tahrir Square to clean things.” And soon afterwards, men and women were removing garbage and cleaning the square. This is startling in itself—no one, it would appear before today, ever thought of cleaning debris or sweeping streets in Egypt.

I received the following text message three times in a row from various sources. I’m relaying it as it came: “You can help Egypt if you: buy local products; drive with good manners; stop shouting and learn to listen; spend your vacation here; convince non-Egyptians to spend a holiday in Egypt; keep streets clean; donate unwanted stuff; open a brokerage account and buy local shares; try to help small entities to survive—*koshks* [kiosks] and local small shops; donate blood; vote in September; don’t be part of the problem—if someone asks you for a bribe, don’t enable them, but report them to their superior.” It is a rather long text message, one that is providing telecommunication companies with a whole lot of business, but a genuine one nonetheless.

The obstacles are huge; hundreds of questions seem unanswered. However, with such messages resonating clearly amongst Egyptians, they may just overcome their difficulties.

*With Hosni Mubarak stepping down, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) is now in charge. Ahmed Shafik’s government, one of Mubarak’s last rulings, hangs by a thread.*
He is an Egyptian-American who has lived in New York for over 35 years. In those 35 years, he has not been to Egypt once. Chances are he may never return to Egypt. Nevertheless, he cares about Egypt in his own way and wants to be part of the happenings. He forwards a barrage of emails on a daily basis, encouraging the protesters. He is an armchair protester.

She is a young Egyptian-American who lives in Washington, DC. She is affiliated to the youth movement, being an activist herself. She posts endless comments out of devotion to Egypt. She is quite informed and knowledgeable about the happenings in Egypt, but her life is in Washington. Her visits to Egypt are sporadic and last two weeks at most. Though she participated in demonstrations in her hometown, and her intentions are to be applauded, she is still an armchair protester.

He is an Egyptian-Canadian who lived in Vancouver for over 30 years. Hungry for news about the Egypt he misses, he too forwards emails—the emails encourage Egyptians in general, and the Tahrir Square group in particular, to continue towards their goal of freeing Egypt. He is an armchair protester.

These are examples of the thousands of Egyptians who participate in the discussion about Egypt from their desktops. They egged on the
youth and are now ecstatic about how events have unfolded in Egypt. Their comments and emails are patriotic and supportive, but let’s be clear: these activists will never be directly affected by a tumultuous Egypt.

They write from the comfort of their armchairs, in their comfortable cities, and in their comfortable worlds. If the Egyptian world tumbles, these folks will still go to work, make money, and enjoy life. True, they would worry about family and friends back in Egypt, but in no way would they personally suffer the consequences. The active armchair protesters have even rallied in parks and walked in various demonstrations around the globe. Afterwards, they have returned home to their comfortable chairs in comfortable cities.

I wasn’t a blogger until two weeks ago; I had only 15 friends on Facebook, which I never opened unless I was nudged or poked—every two months at best. And I didn’t tweet. But since the Egyptian crisis, I have started using as many social media resources as possible. That’s in addition to the deluge of emails that jam my account.

I did a quick analysis of the comments, tweets, and emails that I received on the Egyptian revolution to find that maybe 20 percent come from within Egypt. The rest are sent by Egyptians who live all around the globe but mainly in the US and Canada. This could be because I live in Canada; hence, the people I know live in Canada, and the US too. I don’t doubt that Egyptian emigrants to Australia and Europe are reacting similarly.

The armchair protesters have good intentions; they have been exposed to a more democratic life, and they hope for a similar life for all Egyptians. They also provide moral support, which is definitely needed, but they are not at the forefront or on the ground. They will not suffer. If things get worse, they will not be affected by the Egyptian pound tumbling, properties plummeting in price, and insecurities playing havoc with their lives. They will still have jobs, properties, and security.

Do these expat Egyptians play a significant role in what is happening in Egypt? Absolutely. Comments on Facebook make heroes out of protesters. Comments on Twitter demote ministers to thieves. Emails and tweets are read in the square and direct the protesters in the path
they take. No one can deny that this uprising is unique because of the role social media is playing—a topic for another dispatch.

The armchair protesters play a crucial role. Maybe they will not leave their comfortable cities, but they can assist in the rebuilding of Egypt from where they are.

They must be proactive in their support. For starters, they can come and spend their holidays in Egypt since the tourism industry will need years before it returns to normal. And in doing so, they can encourage non-Egyptians to come and visit too. They must also find worthwhile causes to donate to and organize campaigns for such causes.

By playing a real and fundamental role in rebuilding Egypt, the armchair protesters will have left their armchairs, stood up, and made a real contribution to the uprising.

The young armchair protester from Washington, DC, has proven me wrong. She has since moved permanently to Cairo.
On the morning of March 7, as the uprising escalated to a real revolution, my sense of ambivalence and frustration increased.

Ahmed Shafik’s cabinet resigns and SCAF appoints Essam Sharaf, a Tahrir choice, as prime minister.

In Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*, Madame Defarge ferociously knits away names as the guillotine beheads one somehow-affiliated-to-the-monarchy person after the other. Her vindictiveness is in charge. Disturbingly, this analogy recurs in my mind when I think of the Egyptian scene of today.

The euphoria created by the January 25 revolution was exceptional—a feeling never before experienced in Egyptian life. Egyptians celebrated by, once again, loving their country and one another. They enjoyed the moment with presidents and countries applauding them; Obama’s words, “We should teach our children to be like the Egyptians,” resonated deeply in the Egyptian consciousness. They were proud. And they had every right to be so.

Nevertheless, a tarnishing twist is in the making. The first turn of the twist lies in the atmosphere of vindictiveness that has captivated
Egyptians and their media. It seems that everyone has become a watchdog ready to disclose and leak information, and in the process dispose of anyone linked to Mubarak’s regime. No valid proof of wrongdoing is necessary. And the pillars of the country—businessmen, politicians, administrators, and subordinates to those in the ex-establishment are incriminated, humiliated, and destroyed sometimes by mere association. There may be truth in all or some of the accusations and allegations, but little has been proven.

Egyptians are not revenge seekers by nature; however, they are carrying the vendetta too far. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, it was considered a capital crime to sympathize with or mourn those whose heads rolled. Are Egyptians going that far?

The second source of tarnish is that the general mood in Egypt is “let’s move on.” Let’s start producing, working, and sending our children back to school. Talk to cab drivers, retired folks, trades people, and the regular men and women on the street, and they will all tell you that democracy is being lost yet again.

They had a dictator once and now they have another voice coming from the Square deciding for them how life should be. Their voices are not being heard, and the Tahrir Square group is still making more demands on behalf of Egypt as a whole. These tired and weary Egyptians have begun their own demonstrations in other parts of Cairo. The word “Kifaya” means enough, and during Mubarak’s regime, “Kifaya” was a word used often and directed at Mubarak; “Enough already; go.” However, it is used again now but with a different connotation altogether.

The third indication of a tarnished revolution is in the hearsay and fabricated stories circulating in the media, social media, and publicly amongst folks. After Mubarak stepped down, rumours had him go off food, refuse medication, be in a coma, die, fly to Germany to get treatment, fly to Saudi and the Emirates to export his money, and die again all in a matter of two weeks. Rumours had his wife, Susanne, flee to London with 90 money-filled suitcases. It also had her sell unique Egyptian artifacts and treasures. As for the money that the family looted, it keeps growing by the hour until it has reached
astronomical proportions that the normal Egyptian cannot fathom—70 billion. I’ve heard ordinary Egyptians ask, “How much does 70 billion mean exactly?”

A wise Egyptian was rationalizing and hoping to get a clear answer. “Say I’m a greedy and unscrupulous Egyptian; what would I do with all that money? Buy 10 mansions around the world, each with its own set of cars; buy a couple of private planes; have lots of money sitting in Swiss banks, and, what the heck, let’s throw in the Manchester United team.” According to this Egyptian and the rumours, Hosni Mubarak would still be left with an incredible amount of cash. Many Egyptians don’t know why he would need all this money. Again it’s all hearsay.

Then the impact of social media is huge. You don’t need to go on national TV anymore or be published in a newspaper, just be an avid tweeter. In social media, much of what is written is logical, documented, and verified by photos. Still, much is hearsay and propaganda from one group against another. In this kaleidoscope of news, truth has been lost. And those writing comments are often unaware of how profound can be the effect of their words.

For this wonderful revolution to gain back its strength and rise above the current difficulties, it should return to its original theme: love of Egypt. As for Egyptians, to see the fruits of this historic and heroic event, they must refuse blind vindictiveness, stop listening to and repeating illogical hearsay, start listening seriously to one another, and take into account the lives and welfare of all Egyptians.

It is going to be a long journey.
Is Mubarak’s regime still manipulating the scene in Egypt?
March 14, 2011

The conflict begins. But Mubarak’s followers soon afterwards lose their grip. In case you are wondering, I’m not refuting what I said in the previous post. Vindictiveness is not vigilance. Then again, I’m as confused as all Egyptians. This is exactly how many Egyptians feel: disillusioned, worried, and confused.

An affair between a Muslim woman and a Christian man set off a series of events that ended with the demolition of a church, the deaths of several persons, and most importantly an agonizing rise in hostility between Muslims and Christians across the nation.

From the start of the revolution, I was worried. I had a feeling that things were not going to be as smooth sailing as everyone predicted. I was concerned about the revolution’s demands exceeding what could be accomplished; about the truth getting lost, twisted, and embellished; about the state of the economy; about the sideline protests that seemed to be popping up here and there; and about the ordeals of the ordinary Egyptian on the street.

However, I’m a trusting soul, and I wasn’t worried at all about the old regime as an entity. I honestly believed that the regime was dead
and didn’t think that it would try to play havoc with people’s lives. Now I’m questioning this and asking—is the ex-regime still manipulating the scene in Egypt?

Friction between Muslims and Christians in Egypt is a common occurrence. On and off, after a minor event, such as a love affair or a business conflict, clashes occur. It starts off between two ordinary Egyptians and ends as a showdown between the Muslims and the Christians in that particular village. However, never has it spread nationwide and grown so totally out of proportion as it has this time round. It was always contained in the original district, and it never resonated across Egypt.

Why the change? Is it because Christians, like all Egyptians, suddenly feel they have the right to protest, and they want rights they never had and have every right to attain? Or is this a premeditated and preconceived plan to instill fear and mayhem in the society? The former rhetorical question is acceptable, but the latter possibility is quite alarming.

The sectarian chaos created across Egypt seems more systematic than usual. Christians and Muslims in urban areas in Moqattam and Helwan, amongst other areas, are killing one another over an event that occurred in the tiny village of Sol, a good distance away. As a result, I’m on the verge of believing that hidden hands are fanning people’s anger. The ex-regime may not be at bay after all but is still there in the background, working towards the destruction of Egypt.

Another good reason to think that Mubarak’s people may be stage-managing the scene is that, for forty days, the police force vanished into thin air, and the armed forces assumed the duties of the police force. Then, the chosen-by-the-people prime minister, Essam Sharaf, in his first speech to the nation, promises that the police force will show up the next day, and it does. Suddenly the police force is quite visible again.

What was earlier holding the police force from doing its job? Where had it disappeared? But most importantly, did the ex-regime control the police force and give it orders not to function so that chaos would preside? It seems farfetched and unbelievable, but many Egyptians believe that that is the case. I am doubtful, but my confidence is waning in the belief that this is all not deliberate.
Overturning a regime

The third reason for my skepticism is the systematic burning of documents and files that took place in the National Defense Building. And those fires were not extinguished quickly enough. In fact, it is only when the public intervened that the arsonists were stopped. Egyptians again may be right in thinking that these deliberate acts of destruction are the work of Mubarak’s followers.

If this is the case, and indeed the old power has a hand in what is happening in Egypt today, we should be asking this: what have they to gain? In no way would Hosni Mubarak reign once more. The people have spoken and would not allow his return. So what would the ex-regime gain by such manipulative destruction?

The ex-regime is, as any regime is, a layered structure. Though those in the highest level on the totem pole were removed, those in lower levels were not. They have a great deal to lose, and one way to overcome this crisis might be to craft instability. How? By putting Muslim Egyptians against Christian Egyptians, by creating havoc within the society, and by destroying any evidence of previous offenses.

As my notions and ideas change by the day, I’m now more accepting of the Tahrir youth’s demands: the more elements of the Mubarak regime that go, the better off Egypt will be. It seems fairly drastic, but maybe the revolutionists were right in asking for deeper eradication of the powers that used to be and wanting to weed out the remainder of the supporting clan. Much to my dismay, though, all this cleansing will put the country on hold for longer than necessary.

The days to come will show if indeed the ex-regime still controls the Egyptian street today. We can only wait and see.

Copts are Egyptian Christians accounting for approximately 10% of the Egyptian population. They follow the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria. When Islam came to Egypt in the 700s, Copts had been there for many years before.

Egyptians live with certain unspoken ground rules. Muslims fill government and bureaucratic positions, with a token Coptic minister filling one ministerial post or another. Most Copts work in trade and avoid formal governmental
positions. Never has Egypt had a Coptic president, and the possibility of having one in this time in history is almost impossible.

Socially, however, Egyptians, both Christians and Muslims, had always lived together unaware of the coming religious rift. It is only in the last few decades that conflict has arisen between Muslims and Christians—leading to immense upheavals.
Adjusting to a new Egypt

Egypt says yes to Constitutional Amendments
March 24, 2011

This is the first time I mention the Muslim Brotherhood as an entity. The Muslim Brotherhood, and other Islamic factions, will dominate the discussion as time goes by.

Via Skype, I asked my close Egyptian friends, the Eids, if they will be voting on the constitution amendments on March 19, 2011. Their response was swift, “Absolutely.” The Eids like many other Egyptians had not voted before. Via Facebook, and as a preamble to her voting mission, another friend quoted a religious verse; “I’m depending on You [God] in all my endeavors,” she wrote transcending this simple vote to a totally different level. Upon her return from voting, she again wrote, “Done it! I’ve voted for the first time in my life.”

And across all Egypt the voting turnout was truly humbling. The voter lineups zigzagged around blocks and wound up narrow staircases with voters seeming quite content to queue for hours. The physically challenged and the ninety-year-old walked up these stairs to vote. This
is a remarkable achievement for a people who had never bothered
to vote, and never even lined up for that matter, to vote or for any-
thing else.

The depth of such change can be seen in Safia, my mom’s illiterate
caregiver. The concept of voting had never occurred to her before, but
this time round, she exercised her right; as she was voting, someone
asked her whom she would be voting for. She responded proudly; “I’m
free to vote whichever way I please.” This is truly phenomenal in the
annals of rapid development of political consciousness.

It goes without saying that the desire to vote is the first transfor-
mation that the revolution produced: it has created passion in a people
usually unconcerned and apathetic, and has made them believe in their
own voices and votes: kudos to the revolution.

In hindsight, I wish I had asked the Eids whether they were voting
for or against the amendments. It didn’t seem as vital then to know
how they will vote as to know that they will indeed vote. However, the
choice that the Egyptians have made is quite critical. And the results are
out: 77% said yes to the constitution amendments with 41% of eligible
voters voting. Eighteen million Egyptians exercised their voting rights.
This clearly reflects the views of the people and predicts the results of
elections yet to come.

What does this result say about what Egyptians want?

One group, the “No” group, saw the amendments as falling short of
the required changes. They wanted the old constitution revamped com-
pletely, believing that the amendments are mere patchwork. They also
feared that an affirmation would lead to a hasty presidential election,
and that many non-mainstream parties would not have had the chance
to establish their paths and platforms, or promote themselves.

The educated lead this “No” group. They are mostly in Cairo and
other big cities and voice their concerns in the media and social media.
They heard one another, but, in reality, their voices did not reach ordi-
nary Egyptians.

The “Yes” group is formed of two factions; first are those who want
this period of instability over. They believe the ratified amendments
would return Egypt back to normalcy sooner than later. And they are relieved by the outcome.

But alongside the stability seekers in saying yes are the already prepared and quite developed parties; for example, the Wafd Party, but more importantly, the Muslim Brotherhood, with its political arm, the Freedom and Justice Party. Both, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Wafd, have been present in the political arena for years. And the Muslim Brothers, in particular, have been careful and methodical in their attempts to win people to their side.

Clearly, the “No” followers have been unable to get their views out to the ordinary Egyptian. To establish a following, they would have had to work harder to promote the causes they preach, to widen their circle, and to reach the Egyptian on the street. Indeed, the “No” group would have had to follow Egyptians physically—in the field, the factory, and rural Egypt. This is the only way to reach Egyptians at the grassroots level. Some statistics, though not accurate, say that approximately 25% of Egyptians are illiterate.\(^1\) If one in every four Egyptians is illiterate, then over 20 million adult Egyptians can neither read nor write, let alone surf or browse.

By comparison, the Muslim Brotherhood was able to amass a substantial following. Not only did they appear in TV broadcasts and write in newspapers, but also they congregated, lectured, placed ads in newspapers, and alluded to the connection between saying yes and God’s wish. It is a democracy after all, and everyone is free to say what one wishes.

The Muslim Brotherhood had the means and the followers to put a good front and sway people to vote yes. It is quite clear that Egypt is an open field now for all players, and that not only good strategy but also manipulation will play a prominent role.

All this leaves the “No” group in a predicament; how fast can they work to catch up with the better-prepared “Yes” advocates?

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On April 8, for the second Friday in a row—this one dubbed “Day of Trial and Cleansing”—mass protests return to Tahrir demanding the prosecution of Mubarak and those who held key offices in his regime.

The truce between Muslims and Christians mentioned in this piece does not last long.

It’s almost twelve weeks since January 25 when the Tahrir Square youth shook Egypt and the world. The success stories are many; first, Hosni Mubarak abdicated his position—a glorious achievement. Thirty years of supreme reign finally ended leaving the people in a state of euphoria. In spite of the clashes and deaths that ensued, it was a peaceful turnover of power. Mubarak, along with his family, remains under house arrest in his Sharm El Sheikh villa.

Second, many of Mubarak’s ministers and affiliates are undergoing investigations and questioning: Al Adly—ex-Interior Minister; Ahmed Ezz, former senior member of the National Democratic Party (NDP); Ahmed Nazeef, ex-Prime Minister; and many others.
Third, Egyptians went out in huge numbers to vote on the constitutional amendments. In an unprecedented turnout, millions were concerned enough to line up for hours.

In addition, the government and army council seem to be listening to the people. Every day the media list steps taken to fulfill promised changes from summoning Mubarak for questioning to investigating all the corrupt figures, exhibiting transparency—a true feat by Egyptian standards.

The strife between Muslims and Christians has subsided somewhat. The fact that most Muslims and most Christians may have realized that they have no other option but to live together under the same roof, so to speak, is yet another positive piece of the puzzle. Fanatics remain, but the masses realize that the country belongs to both sects. Surprisingly, many are now saying that religion has no place in politics or government—again another accomplishment.

These are all amazing successes, and they prove that the future can never be like the past. Nothing in the new Egypt will resemble anything in the old Egypt. Egypt is on a new road. However, Egypt is also at a crossroad—a bittersweet crossroad that can lead either way. And as there are highs there are also many lows.

For starters, many Egyptians are at a standstill; they are transfixed on revenge and harbour a capturing hatred; they want to try the evildoers and get the looted money back. Vindictiveness seems to have spearheaded their behavior leaving them blind to reality.

Egyptians must not forget their rights. The wrongdoers must pay the price for their actions, and the victims must be compensated. However, Egyptians can’t remain idle forever waiting for the looted monies to return and the trials to take place. If the monies are ever to be returned, the culprits must first be tried and sentenced. And trials, to be just, may take years. This is the sobering truth.

Re looted monies: some Egyptians have estimated how much each one would get if the money is returned. The figure estimated works out to approximately 180,000 EGP per person. Many Egyptians truly believe this. “I have a family of four and each of us will get 180,000, then in total we, as a family, will receive 720,000 EGP. Just give me
my share; I’ll figure out what to do with it,” a very serious but totally unrealistic Egyptian says. And similar naïve, innocent folks are earnestly awaiting the monies to arrive and believe that, when it does, it will be given to them on a silver platter; “Here you are. It is legally yours—go ahead and spend it.”

Another damaging matter is that ongoing demonstrations are arising just about everywhere. Protestors are mimicking the revolutionists. The revolutionists held their ground and got what they wanted. “So be it; let’s follow that successful pattern.” Their demands may be legitimate—higher salaries and better benefits— but the approach isn’t. They choose a congested area or a visible spot to protest bringing the streets to a halt and refuse to budge until their demands are met—that instant.

School and university students, police officers, and various groups are protesting, too. It is becoming quite common for a group to ask for the ousting of a university president, the change of a classroom teacher, or the resignation of a union leader. Demands have no end. And rights have no end either.

But the most damning low point lies in the rumours and hearsay that remain the dominating factor in Egypt of today. Personally, I have reached the conclusion that I have to question the authenticity of every word, photo, or video I see unless it is validated or is from an extremely reliable source. However, the masses in their innocence are falling victim to made-up or at least slanted stories. One story pulls them one way and the other story pulls them the other way, and they are muddled and confused. Rumours are indeed crippling the nation.

And because of these ongoing rumours, whether they are true or not, the notion of innocent until proven guilty is not in the Egyptian vocabulary at the moment. All those who are suspected, questioned, and ultimately tried have a very slim chance of being proven innocent because the public has already tried them in its mind and found them guilty. Accordingly, the sentences, expected to be announced hastily to appease the furious public, may find everyone guilty. By Egyptian standards today, it would be highly unlikely for a judge to find any one innocent.
Adjusting to a new Egypt

Also, Egypt is still not safe. The police force has yet to function normally. Thugs and escaped prisoners roam the streets freely creating havoc and mayhem. Many stories are circulated about mugging, break-ins, and robbery; whether they are true or not is another issue.

Egyptians must redirect their enthusiasm and passion towards saving Egypt; if they do so, they will indeed succeed because complacency and the who-cares attitude have gone for good.

Mubarak is hospitalized on April 12 at the International Sharm El Sheikh Hospital. He is officially detained for questioning. Both Alaa and Gamal Mubarak return to Cairo for questioning and are detained.
For the last ten days, comments and links focused yet again on the detainment of Mubarak, his sons, and his cohort, and demanding speedy trials, just sentences, and the death penalty for all. Maikel Nabil, a blogger and activist, was sentenced to three years in prison for criticizing the armed forces. Some reminisced about the days in Tahrir Square. “Wish I was there again,” a nostalgic someone said as though Tahrir was a goal not a means. Others, also in Tahrir chanted, “The people and the army are not one hand,” a divisive aim in itself.

But the news that was most indicative focused on the clashes between Muslims and Copts: protests in Qena, clashes in El Minia, and random shooting of a woman coming out of a church in Heliopolis. Two elements are visible here: stagnancy and evil-spiritedness.

The thesaurus defines the word stagnant as sluggish, inactive, dull, and listless—all accurate depictions of today’s Egypt. Most events mentioned above neglect the real issues: how to restore order, how to improve the economy, or how to move on towards a better tomorrow, ignoring the real challenges—stagnancy at its best.
Evil-spiritedness has never been a trait of Egyptians. Forgiveness and pardon, often empathy, are more prominent. Most Egyptians would refuse to be compensated for a misdeed, an injury, or an accident that occurred—“not taking awad.” But the fury against Mubarak’s cronies, and the rage and bias toward the “other,” be it Muslims, Christians, or liberals, has left some ordinary Egyptians reeling. How can anyone consider hanging an ex-president, they say—a demand circulating amongst the activists? How can an unarmed Christian woman be shot at random in broad daylight? How can a governor be expected to resign because he is a Copt? Have Egyptians lost it altogether?

The concept of equal rights for all has faded under the strain of personal rights: my view, my wants, and my needs.

Despite all this, change is in the works. Encouraging messages are resonating in cyber circles. One friend said, “That’s it! From now on no discussion about yesterday; let’s focus on tomorrow.” The second comment was, “I wish people would concentrate more on the future rather than the past; the country is slipping into a dangerous turn. We should never let it slip.” And I say hallelujah and al hamdulellah!

How can we get more Egyptians to think in a similar fashion?

Egyptians will gain if their focus tilts towards tomorrow, if they redirect their energy towards the betterment of Egypt, and if they can consider all Egyptians equal. Only then will Egypt become a better place.

Egyptians, be they Muslims or Christians, have always supported the disadvantaged. This they do quite well, for both religions ask the wealthy to give to those in need. But this is not enough. Egyptians should transcend financial support to political, social, and educational assistance. Only then can Egyptians empower other Egyptians.

Egyptians should meet other Egyptians half way; go out to them and bring them up with them; visit villages and towns and spread knowledge and awareness. Egyptians need to be exposed to the right information on, for instance, water conservation, pollution, and the ramifications of voting one way or another.

If an urban Egyptian can convince a rural Egyptian to keep his daughter at school, to postpone marrying her off until she completes her education, to have only two instead of five children, or to realize
the horror of FGM (female genital mutilation), then he would have helped this man’s family in a manner that supersedes giving him a charitable donation.

The motto can be: “I will do my very best to help the ordinary Egyptian. I will adopt an Egyptian family by visiting and talking to its members, teaching its youngsters, and helping its elders. I will support this family by suggesting change and awareness skills and empowering and enabling them. I will tell them about election rights, but I will also help them understand their duties.”
The language revolution:
A tidal wave battering our language shores
May 8, 2011

In the midst of the Egyptian Revolution, communicators, tweeters in particular, engage us in another, less deliberate but potentially far reaching wave of change.

A few years back, before bbs’s (blackberry messages) and iPhones existed, an indisposed student sent her university professors a collective email. The wording was along the lines of, “I will b hospitalized 2day. I won’t return to university b4 next week. Thank u 4 understanding.” This was an email sent in a university environment, not a text message to one’s buddy.

Her professors were stymied, so they quickly congregated to discuss the email and how to react. They decided to first call in the student and let her know that this kind of writing was unacceptable, and two, to ask the communication professor of that program, me, to emphasize email netiquette as part of the required business writing course of that program.

When I called in the student, she was surprised that this kind of writing wasn’t the norm, and defensively explained, “But this is how I always write.” Again she was told that there is a difference between
standard, professional English and text messaging your friends. Her professors expected the former.

However, the point is that this student personifies a generation’s way of thinking and writing. This is the writing she sees and is accustomed to. If a generation considers this normal writing, how will it affect languages and their evolvement in the long run?

Since then my opening spiel in my business writing courses every semester has had an add-on. Not only does it focus on the norm—avoid jargon, clichés, slang, gobbledygook, etc.—but steer clear of text messaging in professional or academic writing.

Text messaging has arrived to stay and whether the academic and professional languages will prevail over this tidal wave remains to be seen. If your job description entails receiving any kind of writing, you’re in for a surprise.

And now we have Twitter. Twitter limits one’s comments to 140 characters. 140 characters in the world of words are not much. As you keyboard your message, you watch the 140 characters vanish into thin air in front of your eyes, character after character. So what does the wise writer do? The writer comes up with new concoctions that eliminate letters, shorten words, add ampersands, use abbreviations and contractions, and delete articles, prepositions, and punctuation.

Did the Twitter whizzes imagine that they would be instrumental in language revolution?

The shortening phenomenon started off by changing words to letters and numbers: two and to became 2; see became c; and you are became u r, but gone are the days of such minor changes. The Twitter generation is brilliant in finding ways to abbreviate and collapse words phonetically.

Then accents come in to play, too. English-speaking Egyptians have major problems pronouncing the sound “ð” as “th” in mother. It was easier to abbreviate it to “z,” the actual sound they utter. Hence, on Twitter, Egyptian style, the has been oblitered altogether and the comments are doused with “z’s”: Egypt set n example 2 z world.

Twitter has also forced Egyptians to resort to writing Arabic in Latin letters. Leeh keddah? means how come? This is all fine, but an Egyptian
tweeter may resort to the three languages in the same tweet: Arabic, Arabic in Latin letters, and English, which is extremely confusing, a new mixture steering both Arabic and English languages on different courses.

The Arabic language is also under the gun. Egyptians want to write in English but since English does not have certain sounds, they resort to numbers that resemble “in look” the letters in Arabic. Egyptians have started using 3, 7, 7’, 2, and many other numbers to represent these Arabic sounds—7aram 3leek uses not only Arabic written in Latin letters but also numbers for sounds that don’t exist in Latin.

He or she who’s this new phenomenon is correct in being unable to see consequences. Where will this tsunami take us? Where will z languages be in, say, 10 years’ time? Will z language fork in 2 different 1s, 1 used 4 professional and academic English, and z other for everyday use, especially in tweeting & txt messaging?

Wait and see. In the meantime, we marvel at technically driven changes in language usage that are both generational and global.
John Demjanjuk—a case in point

May 15, 2011

The Prosecutor General announces that Mubarak and his sons, Alaa and Gamal, will be tried for the deaths of Tahrir protestors.

On May 11, 2011, John Demjanjuk’s trial ended in Germany. A Ukrainian by birth, a US citizen for many years, and a stateless one today, since the US revoked his citizenship, John Demjanjuk was accused of being an accomplice in the death of hundreds of thousands of Jews almost 70 years earlier. Brought into court on a wheelchair and sometimes a gurney, the 91-year-old has been sentenced to five years in prison.

No clear evidence exists connecting him to a specific incident. Yet he is considered a participant in 28,060 counts of murder that took place in Sobibor death camp in 1943.2 The theory is if he worked as a guard at the camp, then he is an accomplice in the murders.

Prosecutors believe that this verdict will allow other low-rank Nazis—German or otherwise—to face prosecution; hence, subordinates, guards, and administrators would face trial if alive, and anyone

and everyone remotely connected to the camps or the Nazi regime could be accused and sentenced.

It is interesting to compare this to what is happening in Egypt. After the revolution, the quest for justice started with the Minister of Interior and a few others. It soon expanded upwards to include Mubarak, his sons, their wives and their families, many ministers, and the Prime Minister. Then it stretched downwards to include journalists, more government officials, mayors, and businessmen—many detained while “under investigation.” Then it mushroomed into further investigations of subordinates and low-ranking officials.

The prisons are crammed with to-be-sentenced criminals. While Mubarak got away for health reasons temporarily, his sons and ministers have landed in Torra Prison—and have been locked up for some time, too. Now Susanne Thabet, Mubarak’s wife, precariously awaits being sent to El Qanater Prison for women.

Egyptians are as adamant as the Jews and Germans that those who erred be judged and sentenced.

In Egypt, many culprits exist beyond those currently in prison or under investigation. Many others utilized their positions and the system for their own benefit, while even more bought privileges. Exploiting one’s position was acceptable and had gone on for years. It became an entrenched social pattern in Egypt. Because the powerful profited illegally, such conduct trickled down and became the norm.

Poverty also played a huge role in setting these guidelines. If in need, you can be bought. If in need, you did what you could to feed your children even if it meant committing an offence or asking for a bribe.

The majority sinned—from both ends of the spectrum, from the top to the bottom. Anyone who had power, be it minor or major, used it.

However, this may not be the case anymore. I believe it would be difficult for someone to use his position and authority in today’s Egypt. Gone are the days of such behavior and atrocities. Again, kudos to the revolution.

However, John Demjanjuk’s trial raises a relevant question. “Is it still worthwhile to prosecute old men for crimes that may or may not have been committed six decades ago?” the CBC News of May 12
asks. Similarly, to what lengths will Egyptians go to serve justice? And until when? Will they still be hunting down criminals in 70 years? And how far down are they willing to go to reach the roots of evil? How about the poverty-stricken guards of the prison cells where innocent Egyptians were tortured?

My constant battle with friends, family, and even my husband is this particular dilemma. I find it wrong to prosecute a 91-year-old man especially if his crime is not defined—my husband doesn’t. I don’t understand the need to keep feelings of resentment and bitterness intact for decades—most probably many others do.

By the same token, I find it excruciatingly painful to see subordinates questioned only because they worked with a guilty minister. My Egyptian friends disagree; they say that the subordinates should have left their positions or reported the minister. I find it revolting to embarrass and disgrace those investigated—others believe that everyone should be exposed and humiliated if necessary; first, because they deserve it, and, second, so that others heed similar atrocities.

Where is this witchhunt taking Egypt? How deep will it go? For how long will Egyptians keep the vengeful flame burning?

Egyptians must confront reality. Have you never erred yourselves, I ask? Have you ever paid a bribe to get a job done faster or a permit secured? Have you ever double parked your car and given the policeman a couple of bucks so that he assumes your car invisible? Have you never asked a big shot to find a job for someone you know or facilitate an action that could have been stumped otherwise?

If you go after the subordinate because he is associated with the big offender, don’t you have to go after every single “accomplice” who used the same system?

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No, Suzanne Mubarak did not end up detained. She was released after she handed over her assets to the state.

John Demjanjuk died on March 17, 2012.

On the evening of June 4, a minibus driver, Mohamed Sabah, died after a confrontation with police following a routine traffic check, with a resulting riot in the Azbakeya district of Cairo. Reports about the cause and the outcome vary.

So, what happened? Was the bus driver beaten to death by the police force or the mob? Did he attack the police officer? Why did it suddenly turn into an onslaught on the police station? Why did the mob torch the police vehicle and hurl Molotov bombs at the station? Each question reflects a departure from civil behaviour, a descent into lawlessness.

No one knows what happened exactly. Stories are many and varied. Some question the brutality of the police force, but most wonder for how long the man on the street will resort to lawlessness.

Quoting Essam Sharaf, the interim Prime Minister, “The police force did not and will not attack any Egyptian—what happened in El Azbakeya was that someone insulted a police officer and, out of love for the officer, people assaulted the driver till he died.” I tend to believe Essam Sharaf, more than any other source, but anarchy reigns when people take the law in their hands and beat someone to death out of
sheer love for another. Nothing gives anyone this right—no excuse. Whether the culprits are the police force or the man on the street is not important—this is a breakdown of the power of the law.

Egyptians have become outspoken and forthright, which is good, but they also have decided that they are the law. A situation occurs, people react thoughtlessly and venomously, and we end up with incomprehensible chaos. Egyptians lived in a censored society for a good 60 years. Now that they are free, they tend to confuse freedom with anarchy—on the street and in their relations with others.

Talking to my son on Skype in Heliopolis, Cairo, I hear barking in the background. It is 6 a.m. Cairo time. I’m a bit surprised and question the constant noise. My son replies, “The dog has been left on the balcony for the night.” In my logical approach to things, I suggest he let the neighbors know that no one in the proximity can sleep. I realize that I am asking for too much when my son gives me his usual cynical smirk.

Freedom at its best is quite restrictive because one cannot invade someone else’s life or privacy, let alone beat them to death on a whim.

So here are a few examples of how restricting freedom can be. In Vancouver, I cannot mow the lawn, hammer a nail, or work a gadget early in the morning on weekends because to do so would disturb my neighbors on their days off. I cannot water my lawn from June to September except twice a week in the wee hours of the morning, so as to conserve water for all. No one can smoke in a public place, within eight feet of a public building, or even in one’s own car while a child is in it. In many ways my freedom is curtailed. But more importantly my freedom means I can have the opinion and the belief I want. But I must respect the other person’s rights and view, too. And I definitely cannot take the law into my own hands.

So where are Egyptians now? All the factions of the community—the media, the social media, the man on the street, the unions, and the sects—have taken decision-making onto themselves. They assume freedom allows them to say and do whatever they please. They have a long way to go before they understand that freedom is not license, that freedom demands mutual respect.
In Tahrir Square, and only last week, a woman was harassed. Why? Because some men believed their newly gained freedom allowed them to do as they please. After a football match, spectators came down to the pitch and assaulted the players, angry that the rival team won. Heedless of international laws, some vowed to get the Israeli flag down off the embassy. Some thought, “I don’t like the actions taken by the other sect, let’s torch their churches.” What instigated the driver incident was that the driver had willfully gone against the traffic, and because he was apprehended, he assaulted the police officer. This is definitely not freedom—this is lawlessness.

Respect for individual freedoms took 600 years to develop in Europe—we can’t expect it to arrive overnight in Egypt. Baby steps and more baby steps, but ultimately it will come.
What? An Egyptian Oprah?

June 7, 2011

For three consecutive days, and after a month’s countdown, and 25 years of absolute success, the Oprah Winfrey Show finally ended. In a star-studded bash equivalent to the Academy Awards—no, more like the opening ceremony to the Olympics—Oprah enjoyed being surprised and revered by loyal followers and devoted friends.

Oprah started off as a modest talk show host on a local channel. She developed into a full-blown syndicated triumph, a media diva, and a financial whiz, but a philanthropist nonetheless, sponsoring thousands of scholarships, establishing tens of schools in Africa, and supporting numerous programs across the world.

Oprah’s success has allowed her to promote righteousness, empowerment, and betterment amongst the public. She understood marginalized women and other underdogs; she got kids interested in school and others interested in reading. Oprah has done wonders for her viewers.

Sure there were Oprah’s “Favorite Things,” fashion episodes, extreme makeovers, plug-ins, driving with Gail across the US, and Hollywood moments; however, the good outweighed the frivolous.
Adjusting to a new Egypt

After watching the three final shows and reliving the last 25 years with millions of viewers, I have come to appreciate what Oprah did. The “aha” moment: wouldn’t it be wonderful if Egypt had its own Oprah?

Maybe this sounds bizarre, but bear with me for a moment. An Egyptian Oprah doesn’t necessarily have to be a female and definitely won’t be a westerner. But think what a leading and exemplary figure, an Oprah figure, can do for Egypt. This figure, man or woman, must be a true Egyptian and must enjoy the charisma that presidential candidates of today lack.

In Egypt, and in the Arab World in general, the multitudes have no one to look up to—not a single individual is worthy enough for people to congregate around—no president, no star, no academic, and no religious or political figure—none.

That captivating figure, the Egyptian Oprah, would be profoundly effective in today’s Egypt. Although Egyptians believe wholeheartedly in the revolution, the different and contradicting views of potential leaders have left them disbelieving everyone and everything beyond the revolution. With no leaders to guide and no icon to follow, the country is in a miserable state. Egyptians dread the Council but realize there is no other option.

Beyond charisma, Oprah has integrity. She is genuine in her love and devotion towards those in need. Someone with Oprah’s integrity would work for Egyptians devoid of any personal aspiration. Oh, she still has dreams, but she has fulfilled so many of her own ambitions that she has been able to put the interests of others high on her list. True Essam Sharaf, the interim prime minister, has integrity, but he neither has charisma nor leadership.

Oprah also has power. She is a voice to be reckoned with. On her program appeared presidents, queens, academy award winners, sport heroes, intellects, poets, writers, and remarkable individuals. They all were on her program free of charge because it was a win-win situation. She won from their presence, but they won more from appearing on her show. That is how powerful she was.

The Egyptian Oprah would have similar powers. Since her causes would be noble, Egyptians would follow her fervently. If she said the
sectarian conflict is depleting our success, they would agree. If she said rumors and hearsay are stumping Egypt’s growth, they would believe her. If she said protests are futile, they would concede. If she said working is the best alternative, they would go back to work. Indeed, she would become a beacon lighting the path to a better Egypt.

Oprah has empowered women, the troubled, and blacks and other ethnic minorities alike. The Egyptian Oprah would be as empowering to the poor, women, and different sects, but most importantly she would give a voice to Tahrir Square.

In spite of their amazing success, the Tahrir Square activists had no leader. They now need not only a leader but also a symbolic icon. This Oprah figure would have the necessary traits. She would not be judgmental and would not side with one group over another but would listen to everyone and maybe even get groups to work together.

Hence, this Egyptian Oprah—call her Ahmed, George, Mariam, or Noha, it doesn’t matter—will join all the disintegrated forces, unify them, and come out with a very clear vision for Egyptians.

I may be dreaming but I’m wishful. Though I am anti-Nasser, I believe he created a following in Egypt and the Arab World, which was not surpassed by any other leader even when Sadat signed the peace treaty with Israel. This was because Nasser had the charisma if not the outlook and foresight. Maybe we need a charismatic figure like Nasser once more, but with Oprah’s empowering nature and decision-making skills.

Dream on, Azza, dream on!

Cairenes and other large city inhabitants followed Oprah passionately though she never reached smaller cities and towns. Oprah baffled Egyptians when she gave away cars and trips around the world. But more importantly they were in awe of her ability, as a woman, to reach astonishing heights and attract presidents and celebrities, and most of all by her exuberant philanthropy.
Stephen Harper, the Prime Minister of Canada, was rushed to hospital after he choked on a piece of hash brown while having breakfast with his children. His wife called 911, but his bodyguards thankfully were there to perform first aid. True? Absolutely not; it is a hoax in its entirety—a fictitious story from a highly imaginative hacker.\(^4\) And the media picked up the piece and went with it as well. We, the naïve readers, especially when media validate a story, accepted it without hesitation.

In Texas, 30 bodies were found in a mass grave; some of these bodies were dismembered and others were of children. Again, not true, but a made up story by a local psychic. This story was picked up by one of the most credible news organizations, Reuters; soon NY Times joined the bandwagon, promoting the story and sending it to its automated Twitter feeder. From there, the story enjoyed a life of its own and continued to grow.

On Twitter similar fiascos are even more devastating since names and identities are hidden. The Gay Girl in Damascus is a case in point. Amina Arraf, aka the Gay Girl in Damascus, had been hailed as a gutsy

blogger who wound up having quite a following. One day, her cousin used the Gay Girl’s account to report that Amina had been abducted and was being held by the Syrian authorities. All hell broke loose on Twitter with activists around the world asking the Syrian authorities to release her.

Then a growing skepticism emerged. Does Amina Arraf actually exist? She was connected to the world only via cyberspace. No one knew or had talked to Amina in person. When she was asked to forward a photo of herself, she used photos of a Croatian woman who lives in the UK. Needless to say Amina Arraf could have used this subterfuge technique to avoid being found by the Syrian government; however, she could also be anywhere or anyone in the world, depicting a fantasy or a persona.

Actually the latter is true. Today it has come out that the real identity of the Syrian lesbian blogger is a middle-aged married American man based in Scotland, which explains “her” perfect command of English. Good grief! Did this nonchalant and blasé fellow realize that he played a major role in inciting the world against Syria? Where is the world going?

Egyptians are in the same boat. They fall victim to reported information just as does everyone else in the world. They are still under the impression that everything posted, tweeted, and written is valid, honest, and definitely true. Not true!

The fictitious stories are in the hundreds—everyone knows them. In fact, we all believed them at one point or another. It is only after some time, when another event surfaces contradicting the first one, that we realize that we’ve been taken in.

The fantasy element of Twitter and Facebook derives from the fact that social media reports are at the mercy of the imagination of every Tom, Dick, and Harry. The result is that hundreds of stories circulate in cyberspace and that some readers will accept these stories as the honest-to-goodness truth.

So, where does the ordinary news finder go when even the NY Times, CBC, and Reuters err? To these same reliable sources we have always gone to, but demanding that these sources perform due diligence
and the necessary fact checking because amidst these baffling hoaxes we have no one to rely on but them.

I suggest we doubt everything said, realize that most of what is reported is suspiciously incorrect or at least embellished, pause and ponder before we report, check the validity of stories, filter the acceptable from the unacceptable, and weed out fictitious hearsay. I suggest we become stringent disbelievers before we become promoters of false information.

Media awareness is a truly tough hurdle to overcome. Behold and beware!
Cairo and Vancouver—nothing in common you say?

June 17, 2011

Location: Vancouver, BC, Canada; date: June 15, 2011; the event: the Vancouver Canucks losing to the Boston Bruins. “So what?” You say. Well, downtown Vancouver had over 100,000 spectators congregating to watch the game via huge screens—a glorious celebration. However, once the Canucks lost, the unruly, violent crowd took to the streets destroying everything they could get their hands on. They burnt cars, looted stores, and smashed window shops.

As looters and rioters destroyed, others were egging them on cheering and applauding; and while all this was taking place, some were milling around taking photographs and waving to the camera from behind the news reporters working on the story. The bottom line is that the downtown core of a beautiful and peaceful city was being destroyed, and no one seemed to care.

But some did care, for by morning ten thousand volunteers were ready to clean the city, helping with sweeping, mopping, and restoring order. The graffiti on the wooden planks that protected the smashed windows was apologetic; “We apologize to our city,” or words to that effect.
That such an incident would occur as a result of a hockey match is mind-boggling. Why anyone would want to destroy Vancouver—in a frenzy of despicable behavior—is unexplainable. Think about it. The Canucks had stayed the course, won every set they played, brought millions and millions in revenue to the city and their club, and then lost during the final game. The city had come together in celebration with a sea of white and blue jerseys, and then hooligans turned around and spoilt it all.

As usual, my memory immediately took me back to Egypt during the revolution. The scene of downtown Vancouver was reminiscent of the scene in El Mohandseen, a suburb of Cairo, four or five days into the revolution.

While the revolutionists were in Tahrir Square demanding dignity and justice, and working hard to keep it “peaceful,” others around the city were looting stores, breaking into police stations and prisons, smashing ATM machines, and demoting the city to a disaster zone. Havoc reigned.

By the same token, after this shattering behavior on the part of one group, another group worked hard to clean, paint, and beautify the city, while many others stood their ground and protected their apartment buildings all night against thugs. One protestor held a sign that said: “I’m sorry, Egypt.” Sounds familiar?

People, be they Vancouverites or Cairenes, resort to smashing, looting, and ransacking when they are displeased, disappointed, or angry. They suddenly become not only juvenile but also vicious, willing to go to great lengths to damage.

What people are thinking when they smash a store window to grab a t-shirt remains a mystery. Or when they burn a police car, or when they overturn a car and smash it to bits. Why do brains turn into mush leaving people blind and senseless?

During the earlier days of the revolution, my disappointment was severe and deep—that some would resort to destroying a country yearning for respect and dignity, and trying hard to emerge from sixty years of pain, was astonishing. By the same token, I was ashamed and disheartened by those who rioted in Vancouver on Wednesday evening.
However, the Vancouver riot told us that human nature is pretty much the same around the world. Even in cities where education is at its best and the systems are in place to protect and restrict.

How can hoodlums be stopped from being hoodlums? Some said poverty was the cause of Egypt’s riots, but that wasn’t true of Vancouver’s. The alcohol factor is mute in Egypt, too. Education or lack of education? That shouldn’t be a reason in Vancouver even if it did play a role in Egypt.

It's simple. People are enticed and lured to evil doing by the moment, others, and collective force. When others are doing harm, it is very common to join and do the same—the sheer force of the mob.

Though saddened and disappointed by the Vancouver riots, I’m actually relieved to realize that Egyptians at moments actually share the propensity for irrational behaviour with others around the world.
I write when I am alarmed or frustrated; I also write when I am enticed or enthused. Surprisingly, in the last ten days, I haven’t been moved into expressing my thoughts, which has made me wonder if Egypt is finally moving along the right path.

And it may be so; hence my not finding much to write about. Egyptians are starting to redirect their attention from the protests of yesterday to the beleaguering social issues of the future. So, when I watched a TV program that boosted my belief in the goodness of Egyptians, I decided that this charitable initiative is worth writing about.

The venture is spearheaded by four persons: Amr Khaled of For a Better Tomorrow, Amr El Leithy of One of the Public, and the actors/activists Mohammed Sobhy and Hanan Turk. The purpose of this group is to improve the current situation in a few chosen informal settlements—a noble and not easily attainable cause. Their goal is to raise donations and awareness, and to mobilize many factions in the society to actually make a difference in informal (squatter) communities in Egypt.
Let’s first understand what informal settlements are. They are densely populated areas, mostly squalid shacks built haphazardly with no infrastructure—no sewage, no clean water, no electricity, no schools, no garbage collection, and no planning whatsoever. Approximately a quarter of Egyptians live in poverty, and many of the impoverished live in informal settlements.

In these mega slums the residents took it upon themselves to erect dwellings on land that they don’t own, without the consent of the government and with no inspection or approval. They had to live somewhere though, and, since the government did not provide the necessary shelter, they went ahead and chaotically sheltered themselves. And no one cared enough to intervene or consider their issues—Mubarak’s regime is the culprit here. Still, it is with shame that most Egyptians look upon this huge thus-far unsolvable disaster.

Since social injustice breeds violence, these slums became the epitome of degradation, a breeding ground for corrosion, ruin, and humiliation. With no education, no training, and no values to boost morals, many slum dwellers end up on the street pillaging, begging, and swindling, caught in a vicious cycle of poverty, hopelessness and petty crime.

Prior to this project no previous efforts gained momentum. Many NGO’s and charities had tried working in these areas but were not truly successful, or at least they couldn’t create a following. But if this campaign succeeds, the benefits will be monumental.

The first benefit is obvious: to provide relief, assistance, and a level of self-respect to a portion of Egyptians—an astounding feat. The second benefit is to close the gap between those living in formal (serviced) communities and those who live in informal ones. The third is to create empathy towards a huge segment of the population, which has been marginalized for years. Fourth, by improving the living standards of these people, the whole society will gain: less crime, fewer thugs, and a safer environment in urban societies.

So far, this united force is gaining momentum. The armed forces have promised assistance and will have its engineers and architects build the planned homes; thousands of youths are dedicating their time and energy not only to educate the younger generation and the residents in general but also to make them aware of their rights and how they can play a part in society. And donations are flooding in.

We all have ideas but never act upon them, or never see them to fruition; however, to continue to work on an idea until it blossoms into a reality is a true accomplishment. Again this is the work of the revolution—it has given people like Mohammed Sobhy and Amr Khaled the purpose to establish such a project and the stamina to see it to fulfillment.

The project is indeed moving along the right path and will play a role in the livelihoods of thousands of poverty-stricken Egyptians.

Once such a program succeeds, dozens more will follow. And if at one point these informal settlements become livable, only livable mind you not more, Egypt will definitely become a better place.

Such initiatives warrant loud applause, and I await the day when similar programs are implemented in all Egypt—once more, kudos to the revolution.
On June 28, a battle between the armed forces and the families of those killed in Tahrir Square and elsewhere ensues. See the results of the fact-finding committee that investigated the clashes that took place.6

No one wins this round. Everyone loses. The protestors lose; the army loses; the families of those slain lose; the police force loses, but most of all, Egypt as a whole loses.

Did you think that one group was going to win over the other in this out-of-nowhere act of defiance from one side, and supreme act of control from the other? Never in a million years.

Everyone erred, so how can anyone win? This time round no one is free of blame and everyone is at fault. And this is the biggest mistake that everyone is making: believing that one side can win, or only one

side is at fault, when all of the parties are Egyptian. Today, the saying to “cut off your nose to spite your face,” applies.

Take the armed forces; yes, protect the Ministry of Interior; protect the Balloon Theatre, but don’t go after the protestors with extensive tear gas in the Square. The fact that the Minister of Interior had called his men off and asked them to leave the Square and simply protect the ministry is a sign that they shouldn’t have been there all along.

Now take the protestors; why are they attacking the Ministry of Interior exactly? Do they honestly think they can barge into the most secure establishment in Egypt and get away with it? In which civilized country would they be allowed to do so or do they think that democracy is free-for-all lawlessness? And why did they bring Molotov explosives to the Square if the demonstration was to be peaceful?

Now take the passersby; videos show thousands of watchers, roaming the streets at 2 a.m. They are neither participating nor caring very much. While the rock-throwing, Molotov-throwing, and body-carrying are taking place, these were milling around using their phones to snap shots and videos. It is as though these people are aimless and have no jobs to go to the next morning. I’m tempted to say that their being in Tahrir is related to the fact that schools and universities are out. What to do? Let’s join the Tahrir group. Oops! Sorry, I shouldn’t be so nonchalant about things. I must continue to praise everyone in Tahrir or else I’ll be blacklisted, as was the case with many prominent Egyptians, who were turned into a laughing stock for not siding with Tahrir, or for asking the activists to listen to reason. However, I’m actually so dismayed that I’m willing to risk being labeled as such.

And finally take the tweeters; Buthaina Kamel, the presidential candidate, tweets in Arabic, I’m assuming from the Square, “Oh, my God! Poisonous gas? You mean not only tear gas but poisonous gas too, or what?” If it is not poisonous gas, then she is propagating lies. No one realizes that such a simple tweet can create a downpour of venom on the armed forces. She of all people should not spread rumours until she is absolutely sure of the source and its validity. And even if she was sure, she has to think of the consequence of every word. This is how a president thinks.
After the postponement of the trial of El Adly, the ex Interior Minister, the families of those killed in Tahrir threw rocks at police vehicles transporting the defendant to prison, smashing windscreens, and injuring police officers and guards. The attackers were then no better than those who murdered their own children. Had a vehicle stalled, every single person in it would have died an appalling death.

I wonder if the revolutionists or the system would have then accused these families of criminal mean-spiritedness. Those police drivers and guards don’t represent El Adly; when one is injured or maimed, a family is as saddened and as distraught as those who lost loved ones in El Tahrir. These guards are simply performing their duties.

It’s time Egyptians understand what they are risking, and the possible result of all their actions. God save Egypt from the blind, the self-destructive, and the ignorant.
Is the Egyptian way undermining the revolution?

July 4, 2011

‘A well-intending someone decides to commemorate a handful of those who died in Tahrir. Surprisingly though, only a few families are invited to the event at El Balloon Theatre. While the event is taking place, other families are still standing their ground at Maspero, the Egyptian National TV building, asking for a fair and speedy trial of El Adly, the ex-Minister of Interior. A not-so-well-intending someone takes it upon himself to inform this latter group of the event in El Balloon, reminding them that they were not invited hence igniting their fury at being excluded. This second group of families heads to El Balloon to voice their discontent.

In the meantime, at the theatre, an invited mother, whose son had died in the Square, clashes with an army officer. She vents by telling him off. He slaps her only to be punched in the nose by her other son. End result: the officer suffers a broken nose and the son lands in custody. And all hell breaks loose.

Add to this mix a group of people who have nothing to do with all this but are there nonetheless adding fuel to the simmering fire—call them thugs, opportunists, or even those-there-for-the-fun-of-it. They climb the gates of the theatre and crash the event. Simultaneously, as
tweeters denounce the incident, Tahrir Square ignites once more with protestors forking into two groups, one remaining in the Square, and the other heading to the Ministry of Interior to bellow demands at the forces securing the building and ultimately clashing with them. The four factions finally unite in one raging fury.

Had Yusuf Shaheen, the proclaimed Egyptian director, gone off on a tandem and produced this scene in any of his acclaimed films, we would have said he had gone too far. For it to happen in real life is ludicrous. In my last post, “The battle of June 28—a lose-lose situation,” I concluded that no one can claim victory this round.

Why do such events escalate to such a magnitude? Maybe understanding the Egyptian mind and how it works would shed light on why they occur. First and foremost, Egyptians are emotional. Warm-blooded and easily infuriated, they react hastily and often irrationally always oblivious to the repercussions. In this incident, settling scores trumped everything else: common sense, personal safety, and Egypt’s welfare.

The important point here is, when I say an Egyptian characteristic, I mean a characteristic in Egyptians in general—whoever they are. The society cannot be divided into clusters. Egyptians have the same traits, but have different ultimate goals. They are all emotional, warm blooded, and easily infuriated whether they are protestors, armed forces, or Egyptians as a whole.

These incidences also erupt because Egyptians are not very democratic. This idea is not mine though I agree with it. The renowned writer, Ikbal Baraka, says on El Hayat TV, that Egyptians, including herself, are not democratic. They tend to consider themselves always right. They don’t listen to one another; they want to blurt out their opinions; in fact, they shout and attack those who don’t agree with them, all undemocratic attributes by any standard.

Catherine Michael, an Iraqi human rights’ activist who lives in the US, addresses the same topic on the program, Mutheer lil Jadel, of July 3, on MBC. She says that deliberators in the Arab World don’t understand

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the guidelines of deliberating: respect of the other point of view, courteous rebuttal, and willingness to listen.

I visualize the day when presidential candidates can debate platforms at a pre-election debate night without name-calling, high-pitched screaming, and the belittlement of other contenders. Unpractised in the exercise of options in life, in politics, Egyptians veer towards defensive postures that quickly shift to attack mode.

Events such as the El Balloon punch-up cause on-going turmoil. How then can we overcome this madness and put an end to the resurgence of “incidents” in Egypt? The solution is simple. The government must become upfront and communicative. It can attain this transparency by creating a PR unit, which would appear every day at the same time on the same channel to do the following: 1) relay the events of the day as they happen, and 2) answer questions raised by the media, and 3) clarify any misconceptions. The government should not wait for others to ask for explanations; it must be proactive instead of reactive.

This PR unit would address issues as they emerge, cut off the blood flow to fabricated stories, and appease the skeptics.
Has an Egyptian woman ever given you the finger?
The Twitter perspective
July 10, 2011

Has an Egyptian woman ever given you the finger? Yes, I have had an Egyptian woman give me the finger, and I was blown away. I had said something, she didn’t like it, and she responded by writing the symbol “_I_” and nothing else. At first I couldn’t believe that an Egyptian woman would resort to name-calling of that category. And then I was bemused; hmmm, this is quite the change. This is so unlike the stereotypical Egyptian way of doing things.

Ok. Here’s the catch. I was given the finger on Twitter, which is a different ballgame altogether. And immediately, I realized that it was Twitter that gave the Egyptian woman the guts and the anonymity to do so. I don’t think it would be possible for her to do so in public and in broad daylight. So, what are the benefits of Twitter versus old-fashioned email, Facebook, or ordinary face-to-face communication?

Twitter is instantaneous, continuous, anonymous, and to the point. The first aspect of tweeting—immediacy—is phenomenal. On July 8, Egyptians had revitalized their revolution with a huge sit in, in El Tahrir Square. When I woke up, in Vancouver, it was 5 p.m. Tahrir time, and I immediately went to Twitter. And I skimmed through the comments
of the last five hours. I was relieved—no thugs, no rock throwing, no armed forces, and no clashes, only songs, prayers, hymns, and solidarity slogans. Phew! No one else, no other source or TV channel, national or otherwise, would have reassured me in the same manner and with such speed.

So after my morning dose of tweeting, I go about my life only to turn to Twitter again after about five hours. It is Saturday. Everyone is talking about Prime Minister Essam Sharaf’s statement to the people. Tweeters are dissecting every part, even analyzing his demeanor—he seems tired, someone said. The critiques are logical and rational. Then the comments get more demanding, which makes sense since his speech was neither here nor there. It may even have reinforced the idea that nothing is being done. No other source gives people this immediacy.

Of course it depends on who you follow and how many followers you have. If you are a tweeter who prefers having no life other than the one on Twitter, then you are in cyberspace heaven. You will get perspectives from different sources; however, you will also live the life of a hermit cooped up if not in a physically confining space then at least in a figuratively confining one.

Tweeters tweet constantly. Some tweeters tweet around the clock; others make record tweets per hour. By the same token they tweet when they wake up, “Just woke up; how is El Tahrir? numbers?”', and before they go to bed, “Will snooze for an hour in the tent,” or “totally exhausted.” They ask for support: “If you live in the vicinity of Tahrir, unlock your Wi-Fi so we can tweet,” and 19 minutes ago, “Army breaking up sit-in along the Suez-Ain Sokhna Road.” All this gives those craving news a complete picture of the happenings as they occur.

Anonymity is another remarkable aspect of tweeting. On Facebook, you have followers, but they know who you are. Most of the time, and unless you are an icon of some sort, you are followed by family, friends, classmates, and associates. How often would you curse or cuss amidst such an environment? On Twitter, particularly if you use a pseudonym, you could be anyone. You can choose your identity. This allows you to be rude, patriotic, chauvinistic, flaming, or patronizing.
The story of the gay girl from Damascus is a good example of how, on Twitter, you are who you want to be. This is how untouchable cyberspace tweeting can be, and for all we know there may be thousands of “gay girls from Damascus” out there.

The brevity of Twitter comments still leaves me dumbfounded. All comments are within the allowed 140 characters leaving tweeters no choice but to keep their comments short and sweet. Egyptians are masters of the short message.

Let’s go back to the woman who gave me the finger. Though I have my reservations, I must applaud her passion and straightforwardness. If she can use Twitter towards her own character growth, great.

But I hope she will also never disregard or overlook the parts of her identity that connect to Egyptian culture. I say to her continue to grow, expand, and air your views without losing your Egyptian uniqueness.

I give my finger-giving Egyptian female the thumbs up—pun intended.
After six revolutionary months, where are the Egyptians now?
July 18, 2011

It is July 20, and for almost twelve days, the protestors have once more occupied Tahrir Square, igniting a second wave of protests while this time bearing the sizzling heat and scorching sun. The number on hunger strikes has reached 270; some have fainted and have been transported to hospitals. The protests in Suez, Alexandria, and many other cities are also in full swing, demanding major changes, speedy trials, and transparency, and in the meantime crippling highways and government buildings.

More importantly, the military force has not intervened. This has left the protestors the freedom to settle about the Square with facilities such as electricity, rations, Wi-Fi, and tents. Surprising events occur, such as kidnapper hold-ups, birthday parties, weddings, and boycotts of official representative speeches. An amazing number of vendors appear, and an even more amazing number of tweets. The protestors are there for the long haul.

And as usual, though disappointingly late, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) has complied with protestors’ demands: a
ministerial shuffle; publicized trials, indeed the first publicized trial has taken place already; and civil trials for all—all gains. Kudos to the protestors.

However, while this impressive show of resilience dominates the Square, other Egyptians are in lala land totally oblivious of the events taking place. For starters, many families have decided to head to the coast for the summer, ignoring the happenings in Tahrir. Rumour has it that rentals along the Mediterranean Coast are skyrocketing this year—you would think that there was no revolution taking place; it’s party time.

Then yesterday, a TV host invited those who scored the highest grades in the Thanaweya Ammah, the high school certificate, to her program. She had three extremely bright students there, coming from various regions in Egypt. After the usual questions about the future, Shazli asked the students what they think of the revolution, the protests, and the new government about to be declared the next day.

The three students speak softly but clearly and state that they really haven’t been following the protests that much. Indeed the student from Kafr El Sheikh says that the people of Kafr El Sheikh didn’t follow the revolution at all since they are all trades people. Hmmm. Then the TV host corroborates, “You must have been just too busy studying,” but they all respond, “Oh, no, all this was way before exams.” They clearly did not follow the revolution. They seemed to be with the revolution, but the bottom line is that they weren’t avid followers. Interesting.

Egyptians are losing interest. Ask them what they think of, say, the impending ministerial shuffle, and their response is aloof and unconcerned; most haven’t been following the news. Ask them about the situation in Tahrir, and they are indifferent.

You can see two paths developing here. A unified call for resistance exists in the Square, but the shouts are falling on deafened Egyptian ears. Are Egyptians becoming numb? Do they not care? Or have they merely gotten tired of the ongoing unrest?

After the 1967 war, Egyptians were suffering the results of a disastrous war, and huge shame and disillusion. When Nasser spoke on the eve of July 23rd, six weeks after the June 6 War to announce that things...
would most definitely become better, that the army would fix the fiasco very soon, and that the world was fine, immediately, Egyptians headed to their summer resorts, relieved that they had been given permission to move on and enjoy life yet again. Their reaction then surprised me, but it proved to me as it does now that Egyptians by nature don’t respond well to long disasters, ongoing instability, and constant dismay.

Egyptians have been pushed to their limits. What they want is a peaceful Egypt. Some hope that once a president is elected, Egypt will return to normalcy and from then on Egypt will not need to deal with the SCAF, the interim government, or the protestors, for that matter. The uncertainty, insecurity, and fawda (chaos) will vanish. They are waiting for that day.

I can see why some get tired.
Who is above criticism?

Dr. Hazim Abdel Azeem’s Case

July 20, 2011

Dr. Hazim Abdel Azeem was nominated for a ministerial post in Essam Sharaf’s newly appointed government. Tahrir was jubilant since Azeem had been amongst the Tahrir protestors, tweeting with them, and voicing their concerns. In the meantime, the newspaper, *El Youm El Saba*, went after Azeem looking for loopholes in his background. They came back with a damning claim. Hazim Abdel Azeem is co-owner of a company that has allegedly worked with Israel. So before he was even sworn in, the nomination is rescinded.

I’m always relieved when the protestors are appeased. If something pleases them, I’m euphoric because it brings Egyptians closer to reconciliation. One tweet after the other congratulated Dr. Abdel Azeem on being chosen as a member of the new cabinet, hoping that he could accomplish some elements of what he had protested for. Great!

Then comes this anticlimax, which was very disturbing, not only because of Dr. Abdel Azeem per se, but because of what it represents in the Egyptian mentality and behavior.

Egyptians seek freedom of speech. Hardly anyone wants to return to Nasser’s days when my father got up and closed the windows so none
of the neighbors would hear us denounce Nasser. Now, no one is above the law—be it the reigning almighty, the pending ministerial cabinet, the many religious leaders, or Hazim Abdel Azeem. Fair enough.

But, and as usual, Egyptians take things too far. In this free-for-all battle, a spokesperson can defame or slander just about anyone else.

And almost everyone does this. The protestors are culprits here, too. They are all for the prosecution of just about everyone connected to Mubarak and the ousted regime. The flaming insults reveal their astute insight into how dreadful Mubarak’s cronies were. However, it is quite interesting to see them livid when Azeem is considered a persona non-gratis; “Et tu Brutus?” we all say; double standards, we reiterate? While they can condemn anyone, they are above condemnation.

Every day on social media, the blacklisted figures are paraded because they sided with Mubarak, or even voiced their worry, during the 18 days of the revolution. Today, an interesting YouTube clip emerged clustering footage from various excerpts of various TV shows. Everyone who had put in a good word about Mubarak is denounced and exposed. And readers are asked to boycott programs, writers, filmmakers, actors, and singers.

What’s good for the goose is good for the gander. If reputations, backgrounds, and CV’s are open books for everyone to criticize, then we should all accept criticism, be it for our cause or against it.

Nevertheless, and though equality is good, this manner of doing business is destructive.

Where should Egyptians draw the line? Hazim Abdel Azeem did not commit a crime.

If Azeem is worthy of the post, then he should get it. But to keep prosecuting everyone in this manner will ultimately exclude many worthwhile Egyptians. In Azeem, Egypt might have lost a good conscientious Egyptian. He might have become the first of a good chain of government officials willing to change the bureaucratic threshold.

Acceptance and tolerance may be the only way out of this ongoing dilemma.
“The campaign to divide Egypt has succeeded,”
a tweeter said today.

July 22, 2011

An ominous forecast this tweet was. And the call for an Islamic Friday is the first of many yet to come.

A short tweet said, “The campaign to divide Egypt has succeeded.” You know how you scroll down those tweets without pausing for too long at each? This one, however, made me pause. What a thought! What made the tweeter say that? Is she seeing something that I can’t see? A short tweet with only a few words, but damning and worrisome nonetheless.

For a long time we have had the Tahrir protestors versus the old regime and its remnants (feloul as they call them), but this tweet implies that Egypt is dividing into yet more subgroups. The vision I could see was of Egypt immersed in a deeply hateful civil war with militias and groups of Egyptians fighting one another—a very depressing apparition. But forget about my hallucinations—let’s look at what is happening and see whether such a scenario can materialize.

The tweet appeared after the Islamists called for an Islamic Friday, which is quite alarming. Egyptians are all equal, but this sit-in may
promote an Islamic entity versus a civilian one. It excludes Copts from being in Tahrir on that Friday. And it may cause clashes between the Islamists and the current protestors who have been in Tahrir for over two weeks.

The factions that exist today are many. One, we have the Tahrir Square protestors—most of who are moderate in their notions, though adamant in their demands. Then we have the Islamists with various subgroups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis—some are extremists in their outlooks. There are also Copts, yet another religious group. The Copts have decided that they too want a piece of the pie and that they have suffered from inequality long enough. We also have another group forking into two squares: the Mostafa Mahmoud Square and the Roxy one. Both groups of protestors are demanding the eviction of those in the Square and denouncing the humiliation of Mubarak. The final group in all these is the SCAF, coerced into action by the protestors.

And all these groups, other than SCAF, and the Copts, are at one another’s throats, scandalizing one another’s efforts, ridiculing notions, and smirking at spokespersons and followers. From this perspective and in this climate, Egyptians have proven that democracy is an unreachable goal.

All factions believe that their own vision is the right one, which is understandable. All human beings are ethnocentric to an extent—we believe our own values and outlooks are the most appropriate. But since our way is the right way, others to the extent that they think differently are wrong and don’t have the vision, the values, or rationality to come up with what Egypt wants now. This is why democracy is unattainable.

Yes, we are splitting into miniscule subgroups, each group venting its anger loud and clear.

The interesting thing is that in spite of all this, many Egyptians don’t fall under any of these groupings. They still want to get on with their lives, return to normalcy, and feed their children at the end of the day.

The tweet, “the campaign to divide Egypt has succeeded,” may have been mentioned haphazardly without the tweeter being fully aware
of the consequences of her words, but it is still very troubling to say the least.

We want to come through these trying days united. We can fulfill this hope by drawing this on-the-verge-of-a-civil-war mentality to a close. We have to ignore our differences and sit together to think of what is best for Egypt.

The tweet was removed after three hours. This means that the writer had second thoughts about her tweet. Nevertheless, I had written my post already. Besides, she did think the thought, which is why she posted it in the first place.
Today Hosni Mubarak, the toppled Egyptian president, lay on a gurney in an iron cage and listened to the charges read by the prosecutor. I watched in awe.

That an ex-president, six months after his ousting, would stand, or “lie” for that matter, behind bars is unprecedented. In modern history, I believe few presidents have gone from one end of the spectrum to the other in such a short period. On February 11, the day Mubarak stepped down, I wrote, “… even they [the protestors] had no real hope that this could be the end result. They dreamed on but believed it highly unlikely;” and even yesterday, no, even this morning, the debate had gone on about whether Mubarak would be tried in absentia or whether he would physically appear behind bars.

Mubarak’s appearance in court today is hugely significant. The triumph that it implies and validates is immense. When compared to how bloody the confrontations have been in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, you can see that Egypt is in a by far healthier situation. And in spite of the many deaths, the revolution has been peaceful and victorious. In addition, history reminds us that, in other similar junctures, the ousted leader would have been hanging in Tahrir Square by now in a gory coup. Kudos to the revolution.
The second valuable circumstance is the reaction of the SCAF. This giving-in to the demands of the protestors reveals that even if the Council wanted to protect Mubarak, it can’t anymore. It has to listen to the people and yield to their demands.

Mubarak was wheeled in to court, feigning frailty and, maybe, asking for people’s sympathy and forgiveness, yet he was behind bars and was watched by millions of Egyptians and people around the world—all dumbstruck by the momentous event. Another kudos.

One very important aspect of this publicized trial is that the rumours that have dominated the Egyptian society regarding Mubarak’s death, fleeing, finances, health, family, trial, and impact on Egypt today will subside. Egyptians succumbed to this gossip because they stopped believing all governmental sources. Never had an official source kept Egyptians informed, let alone told them the truth. But now, Egyptians must realize that officials may be saying the truth, and the conspiracy theory may not be a given after all.

This is the immediate effect of the trial, but to complete this successful picture, the following aspects must be fulfilled.

First, the trial must maintain the fast pace so far set. This particular court has freed itself of any other commitments, devoting all its time to Mubarak’s case. However, this swift tempo should not tamper with or bamboozle fairness and justice. Jackson Diehl in “Can Hosni Mubarak Get a Fair Trial?” says, “The staging of the trial reeks of haste.” He also compares Mubarak’s trial to former rulers’ elsewhere, which usually take years to prepare, then concludes as follows: “But Mubarak was brought to court less than six months after he was forced from office ... Even the most diligent prosecutors would have been hard-pressed to put together a solid case against him.”

This speed, though necessary, must not entail haste or injustice.

Secondly, Egyptians must pause and recognize this wonderful moment for what it is—an amazing feat. To those who remain skeptic I say, the whole world has turned around to look at you. You have

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accomplished the inconceivable. Pause, enjoy, and ponder. Wait to see if more confrontation is necessary.

But today, someone on Twitter said, “The trial is only one of our many demands. We must remain vigilant until all our demands are met.” Another one said, “This trial is a big farce. Nothing will result from it.” And others are still after SCAF, wanting it to step down. The skeptics are not satisfied, and the cynics remain doubtful.

This tone will put Egypt in a predicament. It seems that some want to remain perennial protestors after all. They must realize that Tahrir Square is a means not an end. Appreciating the achievements is one sound step towards success; waiting to see how things develop is another.

It is true that, in reality, the trial is neither here nor there—the economy is still floundering, security is at a bare minimum, and job opportunities are non-existent. Then, the question of which comes first, the presidential election or the constitution, remains a dicey issue. Over and above all this, the zealous hardliners, the fundamentals, aka Salafis, are playing havoc with Egypt as a whole. Still, the publicized trial is a diamond in the rough. It needs to be brought out, polished, and looked at with total awe.

Every time I am depressed and worried, something happens to lift my spirits up. August 3 has done just that. It brought back hope of a better Egypt.
“He who is without sin amongst you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.”

August 9, 2011

Amidst the chaos, lawlessness, and my-way-or-the-highway mentality, I’m seeing many unforgiving souls. I’m seeing not only the disgruntled but also the merciless and the ruthless. I’m seeing those who seek vengeance against the regime, and I’m also seeing the same settling of scores trickle down the various hierarchies of lists.

I am the first one to say that Mubarak has to be tried (A Day to Remember: August 3). His regime and offensive associates must be tried, too, fairly and justly though. But my issue is not with the big shots—they definitely deserve to pay the price of their blunders. My issue is with the rest of Egypt—Egyptians as a whole.

Egyptians lived for years in a culture that allowed and accepted misdemeanors or petty offences, as much as they did nothing regarding corrupt systems and fraudulent behavior. All resorted to the influential people they knew, their wastas, their networks, to find a job, to secure a deal, or to get a process or some paperwork completed faster.

Deans at universities, in particular medicine and engineering, made sure their protégées would “inherit” academic positions, and ultimately take over from them. It was interesting because if the older dean was
a Christian, then this position never went but to a Christian, and if he were a Muslim, it always went to a Muslim. So it wasn’t only wastas but bigotry, as well.

People disliked this favoritism and spoke about it openly, but no one did anything about it, especially if they were to gain from it. Compliance, you say? Or crime?

In that culture, Egyptians who had the money bought their peace of mind. They paid for an easier process and a speedier one. Of course, the cost was passed on to all Egyptians. Still, it was the norm and everyone did it. Don’t tell me that anyone was over and above this mentality. It was the thing to do. And isn’t this yet another crime?

If you went to a government office to have a paper approved, the bureaucrat would create a conundrum of queries that you wouldn’t be able to solve—all unnecessary and irrelevant. How do you solve this dilemma? You pay, and you get out of that office as quickly as possible. Who is the criminal here? Both, you, the affluent payer, and the government officer, who readily utilized his position, are categorized as criminals—you both deceived other Egyptians and the country in general.

By the same token, anyone who had power—whether that person was at the top of the totem pole or at the very bottom—used his position to his advantage. Visualize this: the street is blocked; not one single parking spot is available for blocks on end—you want to park; the simultaneously powerful—but-desperate traffic constable gestures you off. You dip into your pocket; find a fiver—less than a single dollar; stick it into his hand and he moves away. Both of you have won; who loses? Egypt. But it doesn’t matter as long as your immediate needs are met. Look me in the eye and tell me that you never paid a bribe to get a job done faster or a permit secured? Tell me that you haven’t resorted to such actions.

When you think about it, everyone has a little power in his own domain. The teacher, the officer, the lowly administrator, the doctor, the hotel manager, the maître d’hotel, the medical assistant who gets you to see the doctor faster, and the janitor, “bawab,” who opts not to see
whom you bring in to the apartment building—lady friends are a big no-no in Egypt—just about everybody has some vestige of power.

Bottom line, the words of Jesus are ever so fitting: “He who is without sin amongst you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” (John 8:7) I believe that there is no one without sin in Egypt; everyone has committed a crime of some sort. Sure there are crimes and there are crimes, but if we apply the words of Jesus, we will realize that we are all in the same boat—having committed crimes of various sizes and shapes. And since the big crooks got away with catastrophic crimes, we got away with the felonies.

If this is the case, Egyptians must then confront reality and realize that we have all erred. And don’t tell me that these are minor misdemeanors because if you go after the subordinate because he is associated with the big offender, if we use the same system, then we are complicit, and are no better. Corruption has to stop at the bottom as well as at the top.
The Egyptian Flagman—rational or irrational?
August 21, 2011

Egyptian border guards are killed during an Israeli attack chasing militant cross-border raiders into Sinai. Thousands of Egyptians protest in front of the Israeli Embassy, which is housed in an apartment building in Giza, along the outskirts of Cairo.

Ahmed El Shahhat, a zealous Egyptian demonstrating against Israel, scaled 13 floors of the façade of a building housing the Israeli Embassy. The protestors below hushed and buzzed as he climbed, turning euphoric when he finally reached his goal, snatching the Israeli flag, ripping it off, and replacing it by the Egyptian one. Upon his descent, jubilant protestors carried him on the shoulders, parading him around. Many TV channels glorified him. This incident will go down in history.

Ahmed is an Egyptian who acted patriotically but nevertheless irrationally. Had he fallen or been shot at from the police forces below or from inside the embassy itself, he would have caused many deaths, be it in a confrontation with Israel or through standoffs with the armed forces. His adventure succeeded, giving Egyptians reason enough to rejoice for their returned dignity, which seemed to have been trampled upon.
However, it could have gone either way. And had it gone the wrong way and had he plummeted 13 floors to the ground, the least Egypt would be doing now is mourning the death of yet another Egyptian.

Shahhat’s climb was in response to an incident along the border with Israel. Skirmishes have happened before, but it is not clear why the public reacted this time round. Often these scuffles were hushed up by the authorities, but even when they weren’t, the public was usually complacent. This time round it resulted in a demand for the departure of the Israeli ambassador. The revolution had a big hand in these consequences.

I’m puzzled. A couple of years back at the Rafah border, Palestinians stormed the Egyptian border with bulldozers and injured and killed several Egyptians. Nothing happened—no demonstration, no protest or standoff in front of the Palestinian Embassy.

Had the Palestinian incident at the Rafah border happened after the revolution, would the Egyptians have flared up in the same manner as they flared up today against the Israeli one?

The response against Israel has its positive and negative sides. It is positive because it shows how Egyptians have changed. They now care enough to show solidarity and to defy even Israel. The negativity lies in the fact that Egyptians demand change immediately and upfront. They also are not leaving it to any official to do it for them. They are taking things into their hands and believing that they can change their world.

Of course, this behaviour has been caused by the delayed reaction of the Egyptian leaders. A situation occurs—the Council lies low and does nothing, the protestors put their feet down, and then the Council reacts. In the case of the Israeli attack on the Egyptians at the border, the Council has already issued two statements, one before the protestors ganged up in front of the embassy and one after—you can tell which statement is stronger, of course.

This tardiness or deferred response by the Council is teaching Egyptians that they can get away with anything. Their demands will be met; and had they not pursued their demand with a vengeance, change would not have taken place.
From the look of things, Egyptians might be unable to settle down and live a peaceful ordinary life again. They have ousted Mubarak, imprisoned his followers, and had him tried and caged amongst many other successes; and now they have removed the Israeli flag off the embassy with all the implication of such action. They know they are a power to be reckoned with; they believe they can continue to change the world.

Even if they could solve all of Egypt’s problems, aren’t there other causes for Egyptians to overcome? Because they don’t know how not to, they would demonstrate to oust Bashar el Assad of Syria or Qaddafi of Libya, create enough uproar against the Saudi Government for banning women drivers, or protest the building of settlements in the Occupied Territories. And this is the fear—that since they have proven to themselves that they are capable, they will want to change the world. And in the meantime Egypt itself will continue to watch in horror because it is at a standstill.

There will always be a cause to protest against. Causes never end. And these zealous Egyptians have to realize this reality. At a certain point, they will have to get on with their lives, accept that they have done enough, and maybe try to live a life void of Tahrir, protests, and causes. Is it possible? I wonder. Or has Cairo become a proving ground for radicals?

And while I’m pleased that Egyptians are joyous about Ahmed Shahhat’s heroic act, I’m against attacking an embassy in any shape or form. Other countries will worry about their delegations in Egypt because Egypt cannot protect them. I also wonder how Egyptians would react if some Israeli opted to scale an Egyptian Embassy.

Actions have consequences. Let’s think through our actions before the next gutsy but unlucky fellow scales the next building.

As a consequence to the above episode, a concrete wall, to be dubbed “the wall of shame” by Egyptians, was built in front of the apartment building housing the Israeli Embassy. The aim was to deter other flagmen and future hostile aggressions.
Israel fires across and into the Egyptian territories and murders Egyptians while pursuing factions that killed eight Israelis. Then, of course, the overnight hero, Ahmed El Shahhat, dubbed the Flagman, scales the embassy building façade to remove the Israeli flag and replace it by an Egyptian one.

Suddenly Egyptian tweeters and journalists alike are calling the Camp David Accord, a treaty that lasted 33 years, unbalanced and unjust. They also insist on its cancellation and the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador.

What instigated this sudden uproar? True, the death of several Egyptians is cause to protest, but the treaty with Israel is not something to tamper with since on its cornerstones lie the foundations of modern Egypt.

Prior to the treaty, Egypt was in a constant and recurring collision with Israel. Egypt had lost Sinai in the Six Day War, and it hurt. Egyptians held their heads down, shamefully acknowledging their land loss and defeat. Then came the victory in ‘73—call it what you wish; it was and is still a victory in the eyes of Egyptians. And Sadat went to Camp David in ‘78 victorious, and he fought to get as much as he
could from the Israelis within the limited boundaries. Diplomacy at its best guided the haggling and bargaining. True, Sadat had to give in to many demands, but he also got a lot back—Sinai for starters. And Egyptians learned from the experience; they learned that Sinai, in addition to being a precious slice of Egypt, is a gold mine, which they must rebuild and in the process utilize.

Sadat encountered large impediments to winning Sinai back—Arabs and Egyptians alike stood against him. And after 33 years, those Arabs who were against Sadat, remain where they were when the accord was signed. It is Sadat’s wisdom that brought Sinai back, though he paid with his life. But it was the Accord, with Sadat in the forefront, which paved the way to the Egypt of today.

The pros of the treaty are widely known, but let’s list them here “lest we have forgotten.” After Sadat signed the treaty, the world began to consider Egypt a nation wanting to live peacefully along with its neighbors. And they treated it as such. Then Egyptians began the road to recovery; resources that had gone towards armaments and war were redirected towards the economy and people, whilst the army focused its resources and manpower on building bridges and constructing roads. Most importantly, the shadow of war that hovered over our heads for decades was lifted.

And so far, with the exception of a few minor scuffles, the Accord has been successful.

After this long preamble, we need to ask the 60-million-dollar question. When the opponents to the accord speak out and ask for its annulment, do they want to go back to pre-accord days? Bear in mind Sinai was occupied by Israel then. What are they cancelling? Which part? The whole agreement or the parts they dislike?

It makes sense to reconsider the treaty and look at improving certain components in it. The restriction of armed forces in Sinai needs to be renegotiated for Israel’s sake as much as it is for Egypt’s. If the Egyptian forces have a more extensive presence in Sinai, the smuggling, the border clashes, and the dreams of those who want a slice of Sinai will subside.
The Israeli/Arab World situation has been ongoing for 63 years. It will continue to brew as long as the Israeli/Palestinian dilemma exists. However, Egyptians are sidetracking by focusing on it today. Major upheavals are happening within Egypt itself, and resolving these immediate challenges should be the main objective.

Besides, at this point Egyptians haven’t got the government, the president, or the power to negotiate such a treaty. Let’s focus on our internal affairs, and once we sort them out, we can deal with other issues.

Nurturing this newly acquired zeal for protesting against everything and anything is pointless, as it simply produces perpetual protest. The Israeli incident is definitely a detour, but then the Syrian or Libyan revolutions and any other standoff or uprising that occurs in the near future are detours, too, if they entail protesting in front of embassies, closing off streets, and risking Egyptian lives—all matters that Egyptians are really tired of.

It’s good that Egyptians care about global issues, and those of the Arab World in particular, but Egyptians must realize that these causes are diversions. If the Camp David Accord is tinkered with, Egypt will lose. But Egypt will gain from a renewed focus on internal issues in the road to recovery.
One of the most outspoken and rational Egyptian tweeters is Mahmoud Salem, aka Sandmonkey. In January of this year, I began to follow Salem, and I found his blog informative and current. He introduced me to many other sources, which I still follow until today.

Mahmoud Salem represents the young activists that changed the face of Egypt. He also ran for the Heliopolis seat in parliament. Though he didn’t win, he is thought highly of, and many would like to see him play an influential role in today’s Egyptian political scene. Salem also writes regularly and his editorials are exceptional.

But today Salem, who could have become my parliament representative since I am from Heliopolis, bombarded Egyptians with a weird message: that 60-year-old Egyptians should not play a significant role in the future of Egypt. This sound writer has suddenly turned against those over 60. “The next Egyptian government should not include anyone over 60,” he says. “Minimum age to run for any political office: 21. Maximum age: 59. No exceptions,” he repeats. His focus today is obvious; Egypt needs the younger generation to be in charge. “It
doesn’t matter what your ideological direction is, just vote for someone young with new ideas. That’s all.”

He continues, “So please, wake up and realize that this is a generation war: one generation looking under their feet and while the other is ready to fly.” Salem envisions a war then; he adds, “they got used to the way things are; they know they have 10 years or so b4 they die, and they don’t want any instability for their plans.” This tone exemplifies the arrogance of the activists of today. They believe they know better than anyone else and can dictate paths.

If Salem assumes that 60-year-olds embody the ways of the old regime, it may be understandable though incorrect; for him to assume that all those over sixty should be put to pasture is discriminatory.

Mahmoud Salem should understand that these 60+ hard-working members of society are usually totally with it. They can make major decisions, and they care about their country immensely. Besides, not only those younger than 60 have rights; everyone has the same rights. In a democracy, everyone is equal, young and old.

In the West and other societies around the world, 60-year-olds are treated fairly and justly, for they are capable of performing and can give as much as the young. Many of them facebook, tweet, and maintain blogs if these are the guidelines by which Salem goes. Mandatory retirement has been eliminated in most parts of Canada; “The rules of the game have changed to allow employees to decide for themselves whether they’re ready to enter the golden years.”

Again in Canada, university professors are choosing to work beyond age 65, and universities are happy to keep them on and profit from their experience and skills. While in China, the authority of the elderly in many areas of social and political life is uncontested.

Then let’s look at 60-year-olds in Egypt. Can Salem compare Saad Zaghloul to the youngsters of today? Naguib Mahfouz was over 60 when he achieved the Nobel Prize. Would he retire Ahmed Zoweil, the 66-year-old Nobel Prize winner? Or how about Sir Magdi Yacoub who happens to be 78? There is no comparison between the rash,

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Sustaining the voice of Tahrir

Illogical decisions made by the younger generation to those made by Zoueil, Mahfouz, and their likes.

Had Salem said, “We need new ideas, new approaches, and people ready to grow and continue to change,” it would have made sense. But to say that Egypt doesn’t need anyone over 60 is unacceptable and prejudiced.

And today, Salem says, “We want to open the borders with Tunisia, Libya, and any other country that overthrows its regime.” Salem is unaware of how dangerous such a rash decision would be. As a member of the younger generation, he is thinking with a limited vision and not seeing the broader picture that an experienced person might see.

Generalizations are evil. Neither all 60-year-olds are ready to die nor all 20-year-olds are sound and wise. In all fairness, Salem may end up being a great 60-year-old, and he will reach that age, before he knows it.

In the meantime, until this 60-year-old is unable to talk, voice her concern, or shed an opinion, no one has the right to shush her including Mahmoud Salem.

She will continue to play a role in today’s Egypt. Hopefully Egypt will want to make good use of her abilities and skills.
Think before you tweet
September 6, 2011

Two tweeters in Mexico, a math teacher and a radio commentator, are facing up to 30 years in prison for tweeting false information that the Mexican Government equates to an act of terror and sabotage. The two tweeters propagated information about gunmen attacking schools in Vera Cruz, Mexico, and the kidnapping of five children. This sent the whole community into a frenzy where parents of children in these schools panicked and ended racing to the schools to see if their kids were safe and sound. The telephone lines became jammed, and widespread panic led to several car crashes, which is all expected when parents fear their children’s lives.

Both offenders have said that they were merely repeating known information that came to them via either a phone call or Facebook. And in spite of this seemingly simple and innocent act, this is by far the sternest charge in a social media case. This goes to show that social media, from now on, will be judged with the same severity as any other media source.

Defamation and slander cost writers thousands and thousands of dollars a year, and as we see, from the Mexican story, maybe imprisonment. Tweeters are not talking to their buddies in the cozy atmosphere
of their living rooms; they write to the whole world and do not fall under the radar.

In spite of the breadth of freedom that Egyptian tweeters have gained, they continue to demand more freedom of speech but confuse it with slander and name-calling. They are treading in dangerous waters.

Yesterday, I posted the following: “Egyptian [tweeters] have rights that for the last 60 years, and definitely before that, were unimaginable. They disgrace leaders and authorities liberally. They humiliate the army for protecting the Israeli embassy. They flare up if a Tahrir sit-in is defused. They consider SCAF (Supreme Council of Armed Forces) the enemy, a crime that Nasser, in particular, would have beheaded everyone for. And yet tweeters get away with it.” But not for long; soon media restrictions and guidelines will befall social media in Egypt, too, as they have done in Mexico.

Libel actions and lawsuits happen—whether the source is written or verbal. A writer is accountable for everything he or she writes. Bloggers and tweeters are as responsible for whatever they choose to include in their websites and tweets. When writing about troublesome events or public figures, everyone is vulnerable to libel action.

For instance, in repeating a threat or warning, a slanderous remark, or a fake episode that may incriminate someone, you could be guilty of libel. And it is wise to weigh the complexities of a potential lawsuit in your mind before making any implication that could damage someone else’s reputation, name, or character. For example, an Egyptian tweeter defamed a political figure by referring candidly to his endless sexual affairs; when I said she had better have proof or this may be construed as slander, she said, “It’s not slander; it’s the same as saying Mubarak is a thief—facts documented in hundreds of press stories for decades.” Such information cannot be considered generally acknowledged fact without proof, and this is slander pure and simple. The tweeter is not aware of what she may be getting herself into.

And while Egypt is taking baby steps towards this modern digital world, disappointingly, the technology is abused, and the tweeters are totally unaware of the repercussions they might face if someone opts to go after them. Asmaa Mahfouz is a case in point. The activist/tweeter
was detained, charged with incitement against SCAF, and released on a 20,000-pound bail. She awaits trial. So it is happening, and I foresee more cases cropping up as long as the restrictive guidelines followed in traditional media are not followed in social media.

As tweeters, we must heed this warning. We must be aware of our readers, respect them, and acknowledge their rights. We must think before we tweet—do onto others as we would have them do onto us.
The turmoil of a Revolution: 9/9

September 11, 2011

Prior to the revolution I wondered if Egyptians are capable of living in a true democracy. They lived under tyrannical regimes for so long that, I feared, once they were given freedom, they would turn Islamic or ballistic. Then came the revolution, and it was the epitome of strength, valor, and dignity. It stood its ground. It faced hardships and dealt with them with perfect sense and responsibility. Egyptians cleaned and painted the Square after themselves; the young men and woman of our street cleaned our street in Heliopolis, and I applauded them and cheered from my balcony. And I shamed myself. How could you think otherwise of Egyptians? They are capable of so much.

Then bit by bit the pictures and events of the last months have proven that my original dread may be proved right after all, that Egyptians are still far away from understanding the essence of democracy.

Egyptians are troubled and troubling. Freedom of speech has turned into curses and cusses. And democracy has become a right to destroy buildings, historical gardens, vehicles, and now embassies.

Without rehashing all the events of the last eight months, it’s fair to say that every time a destructive incident occurred, though struck by the malice, Egyptians overlooked it and kept their fingers crossed.
hoping this event would be the last one. They also threw the blame on someone else—the conspiracy theory, foreign manipulators, “hidden hands,” feloul--remnants of the old regime, thugs, etc. The Qena incident; the Abbasiya clashes; the downtown police station collision; the catastrophes during the football matches, and so much more, but 9/9 was quite another matter altogether.

Instead of meeting in Tahrir, which was cleared of every single soldier to pave the way for a safe Friday, protestors preferred to congregate in front of other venues such as the Israeli Embassy, the Judicial Court, the Saudi Embassy, and the Ministry of Interior. First the Ministry of Interior saw its share of hooliganism. Protestors removed the emblem of the ministry and its name, chanted crudely and wrote similar messages on the walls. They stood in an act of collaborative defiance and peed on the ministry’s wall. Yet the ministry forces let them be.

While one group was at the Ministry of Interior, the other aimed for the Israeli Embassy. Bit by bit, the “Wall of Shame,” as it was dubbed, came down. The wall was built a couple of weeks earlier to protect the Israeli building from attacks and other flagmen from ascending it. I hailed this act of boldness, for the wall should not have gone up from the start. And it was going to come down sooner than later. Fair enough.

Then came the disaster—the storming of the Israeli Embassy in broad daylight, its documents spewed everywhere, its ambassador fleeing, and its neighbors and those in close proximity suffering tear gas and total mayhem.

Then of course, one bad action is followed by a terrible reaction from the police force. The disastrous result: Egyptians are dead and injured.

Israel remains the aggressor. It blatantly ignores its neighbors and the Palestinians in particular. Furthermore, the attack on Egyptian soldiers on Egyptian soil could have been avoided. But no one wants yet another war with Israel—who would? In addition, Egyptians want their country to be respected and to remain a safe haven in the eyes of people around the world. Egypt also enjoyed years of peace because of the Camp David Treaty, and that, with a bit of tweaking, can continue to serve Egypt.
The embassy event was *fawda*—total anarchy. Six besieged Israelis remained trapped inside the embassy, and without the help of the Egyptian commandos, they may have perished.

Besides, this fury could have befallen anyone; this time it was the Israeli Embassy. Who knows whom the next victim will be—the Saudi Embassy? the American one? or the Syrian? It all depends on who the Egyptians are furious at that day.

Diplomatic codes of behaviour are internationally acknowledged guidelines for action between nations that may differ in many or all things but must cooperate to live in this world. On 9/9, Egyptians violated globally accredited diplomatic standards. The repercussions will be far reaching.

I wish Egyptians would go back to the ways of El Tahrir Square—working side-by-side, focused and responsible.

Where are we heading? No one knows, but definitely nowhere safe.
It’s the good things that count

September 14, 2011

A youth that is amazingly vibrant, vigilant, and inspiring—a true Egyptian youth—is the first good thing that came about from the Egyptian Revolution. A few years ago, had someone thought that Egypt would turn up a generation so tenacious and so willing to defend its rights, I would’ve said, “Sorry, you’ve got the wrong country.”

I’ve talked about so much gloom and doom that I must admit I’m somewhat ashamed and puzzled. Why did I overlook the essence of this amazing revolution and focus on the negative aspects? Why didn’t I write more about the accomplishments? My response is I did and I have, but that doesn’t negate the feeling of worry that sometimes envelops my whole outlook on matters. However, let’s be clear; the world turned around to watch on January 25; it was a feat of unprecedented magnitude at every level.

Then yesterday night, I watched the song “Fee kol shara’ fi baladi sout el horayia bey nadi—in every street in my country the voice of freedom is calling” yet again for almost the 100th time, and again it brought tears to my eyes. It reminded me of the scene in Tahrir and how extraordinary it all was. The revolution brought out the best in people, and it brought out so much unity and love and goodness.
We need to focus—not on doom and pessimism—but on achievements. And the first achievement is how Egyptians have revived their deep love towards their Egypt—something that had dissipated in the previous few decades. Egyptians had gone about their business, in particular the younger generation, without paying much attention to politics or the current state of affairs. Engrossed in life’s demands, they accepted the status quo and hardly lifted a finger to voice concern or ask for change.

A stereotypical Egyptian youth went to school then university, often because he had to, and ended at a desk doing very little. Some worked hard and persevered, but numbers would prove that they were not many. However, the revolution, and the events that led to it, instigated more devotion if not love for Egypt than had previously been encountered. Egyptians, today, are back to loving Egypt yet again.

The rebirth of “Egyptianism” is exemplified in the activists who proved to be extremely vigilant, following events on an hourly basis. They are on top of things. Scornfully, they refute events that reflect yesterday’s mentality. And their rebuttal is immediate. And most of the time, they have been so powerful that they shaped change and formulated action. True, freedom of speech is often confused with curses and cusses, but this too shall pass.

The second achievement lies in the political attainments of the revolution—the ousting of Mubarak and his regime. Mubarak is awaiting his sentencing, Gamal will not inherit the “throne,” Adly is already serving a sentence, and the cronies who usurped the country are all facing penalties, lawsuits, and sentences. Others claim that the trials are fake; I disagree. Mubarak and all his followers, if found guilty, will definitely serve sentences.

The third achievement lies in the numbers who came out to vote during the referendum. Unprecedented in the Egyptian political arena are the people that lined and zigzagged along blocks to practice their political rights as Egyptians. In the last sixty years, hardly ever had voters shown up in such numbers. If anything, this presence demonstrates the change in Egyptians. It is true many Egyptians are unhappy with the referendum results, but it is the voting as a right that is commendable.
James Zogby, an American Arab who has been instrumental in promoting the rights of Arabs in the US, was a guest on CBC (the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation). When asked about the many revolutions in the Arab World and whether they had any effect on the happenings in the Middle East in general, his response was an eye opener. He explained that after the Eilaat incident where several Israelis were murdered, the Israeli Government would have definitely, in normal circumstances, invaded Gaza yet again had it not been for the happenings next door in Egypt. Israel is paying close attention to Egypt, and in no way does it want to infuriate the Egyptians. The fact that the Israelis have paused and taken notice is remarkable.

And despite my fears and worries, I wouldn’t go back to yesterday for anything.
“Sira’ Fi al-Mina” revisited
September 24, 2011

Watching A Struggle along the Pier (Sira` Fi al-Mina) for the umpteenth time the other night, I saw it from a different perspective. A question presented itself clearly in this particular viewing—what commands people’s behavior during troubled times? Directed by the acclaimed director, Youssef Chahine, the 1956 Egyptian movie stars Faten Hamama and Omar Sharif.

Halfway into the movie, the antagonist, Tawfik El Deken, kills the community leader and then leads the workers into believing that the company owner’s son is the murderer. He stirs up their emotions by appealing to their sense of loyalty. It doesn’t take long for the buzz to envelop the pier, and soon, men full of hatred and fury roam Alexandria’s pier ready to avenge Aam Ismail. Holding sticks and other hand weapons, they march from various regions of the port searching the whereabouts of the man who allegedly killed their father figure.

Exemplifying the mob-like mentality, the men are vehement and enraged. It doesn’t matter who murdered Aam Ismail; the reaction is what counts, for it didn’t take these men long to be swayed into a
destructive reaction. This is what is scary. They are led by their vindictiveness and don’t come to reason until the end of the movie.

The movie depicted this reaction quite graphically, and it resonates with today’s mob-like mentality and how this affects the reasoning of many Egyptians. It is interesting how a simple sentence can provoke spite, turn events upside down, and lead to real calamities. Many of the events shrouding the last few months were the outcome of deliberate incitement.

Yell, “Let’s get the Israelis out,” and thousands barge into the embassy and empty it of its contents and rightful tenants. The phrase, “Down with SCAF,” incites the mob to barge into the State Security Service Headquarters and torch police vehicles. Bellow, “The Ministry of Defense is protecting Mubarak’s regime,” and others are enraged into removing the emblem off the ministry’s façade. And when those outside the court viewing the ex-minister of Interior’s case are told, “The trial has been postponed,” out come the rocks and torn curb sections in an assault against vehicles taking the accused back to prison. Rage rules.

The clashes that occurred between Muslims and Copts in the last few months happened not only because the mob was prompted into action but also because the mob has lost its sense of reason. The Imbaba neighbourhood of Cairo saw 12 deaths and the torching of several churches because someone alleged that a Coptic woman was being held against her will as she wanted to convert to Islam. And a feud between two families in Sol of Helwan culminated in deaths and injuries because of another alleged story: an affair between a Copt and a Muslim. Then, in the village of Saft Maidoum in Beni Sweif, a Copt driver crashed into a Muslim girl on a bike. She fainted and her family assumed her dead; violence erupted, injuring several.

Another scene in A Struggle along the Pier shows the heroine, Hameeda, protecting the innocent but ganged-upon man. She rows him out into the open waters and asks the captain of a small cargo ship to take them on board. Once the two are on board, the rules of the sea prevail. They are under the captain’s auspices, and the workers flocking the waters in little boats are not to board the ship; they must abide by the rules of the sea, as an accepted social and cultural norm.
It is very interesting that a movie in ’56 can depict how rules are accepted and followed, while, in 2011, we can’t do the same. An embassy is under the protection of the host country. It must be guarded and protected because these are the rules by which countries abide. But many Egyptians found the protection of the Israeli Embassy a sign of siding with the Israelis against the Egyptians, when it was a simple matter of following the accepted norm. And following the accepted norm—the social, cultural and behavioural codes that bind us as a people, a nation—is what gives countries their stateliness.

My focus on happenings in Egypt today means that I see analogies to contemporary Egypt in everything I watch. Watch A Struggle along the Pier. You will see it with a different set of eyes this time round.
Field Marshal Tantawi, the head of Egypt’s ruling military council, SCAF, testified on Saturday, September 24, 2011, in the case against Mubarak and others. Prosecutors had hoped he would determine if Mubarak ordered the killings of unarmed demonstrators in Tahrir Square on January 28. Had he said yes or no to the accusations against Mubarak, Tantawi would have solved the case.

Tantawi’s testimony did nothing of the sort. Lawyers said, “He failed to provide evidence one way or the other about Mr. Mubarak’s role in the crackdown on protesters, saying he was not present in meetings that could have proven decisive to the prosecutors.”

Since the ousting of Mubarak, Tantawi has served as the official leader of the country, and his appearance as a witness is seen as proof that justice is being served, and that no one is above the law.

However, Judge Ahmed Refaat had made it clear that the testimony must not be disclosed. He had imposed a ban on media reporting and attending the trial. The media information was to be reduced to

reporting on the logistics of events only. The reasoning behind this ban escapes me. And when Egyptians are told not to do something, they get really excited and run loose trying to do just that.

It is now 6 p.m. Egyptian time, on Sunday, September 25, and the testimony has already been leaked to the press and to Twitter. Twitter is reporting question after question, and response after response. Mohammed El Garhey of The Tahrir newspaper cited the whole testimony in about fifty 140 characters, so each tweet asked a question and then the next tweet gave Tantawi’s response. Immediately others retweeted.

Ramifications? Definitely. But El Garhey defiantly thanked everyone who was worried about his safety, saying, “Lives are set and decided by God not by others,” implying that he is not afraid of retributions. In a tweet, he also implicated the chief executor of the courtroom disclosure, saying the reporting was the work of the talented Waleed Ismail and that he (El Garhey) merely published the information. (Twitter)

On a personal level, these two reporters have gained much: their moment in fame. They will be followed and will become celebrities. On a broader level though, Egypt will face yet another round of ugly confrontations.

On an even wider scale, Egyptians have gotten the message. If such acts of disobedience don’t provide other Egyptians with a clean slate to do as they wish, I don’t know what does. It tells them that it is OK to take the law into one’s hands and that the law does not exist in Egypt—no law, no court, and no power.

From another perspective, the immediate result of this showdown is that Tantawi and the Egyptian judicial system are both denounced and considered collaborators with Mubarak. But nothing Tantawi could have said would have appeased the general public. Had he said he knew of the happenings, he would have been a culprit; and now that he has said he doesn’t know much, he is still a culprit.

The public should have known that Tantawi’s appearance in court was a show to tell Egyptians that the court is above everyone, but if they expected a clear, “Mubarak knew and ordered the killings,” then they are simplistic and not very smart. If Tantawi had said that, he
would have incriminated himself immediately. If he actually knew, he should have come forward with this information even before Mubarak was tried.

Tantawi’s testimony is neither here nor there, and we should never have put too much weight on it. What matters now is that the Egyptian judicial system has lost its integrity and its clout. And these offending reporters will be charged soon so that the system regains some of its integrity, which was trampled on.

The act of leaking the info will not in any way help Egypt overcome the hurdles it is facing. It is merely sidetracking us from the issues that we should be focusing on today: elections.

By humiliating the court, these Egyptians are humiliating Egypt. Yet one more check against us.

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Update: September 26, Garhey says, “I’m free and fine, and I haven’t been threatened and no action has been taken against me. I’m not afraid and I don’t seek heroism... I simply did what my conscience and my duty demanded.” Twitter
How can the ordinary Egyptian tell?

The Maspero massacre

October 12, 2011

A predominately Copt group stage a peaceful sit-in in front of Maspero, the Egyptian national TV building, to protest the demolition of a church in Upper Egypt. They close off the Corniche, the street along the Nile, and fears arise that they may enter the building.

The date: October 9, 2011. The place: the National Egyptian Television Building, aka Maspero. The event: the death of 24 Egyptians, mostly Copts. How: crushed by army vehicles and allegedly shot by army or police forces—6 and 18 respectively. A number of armed forces personnel died in this massacre, but the exact figure is unknown.

The events of October 9 are horrendous. At one level they are obvious and clear—Egyptians dying; at another, so unrealistic that one can hardly measure the bloodshed and butchery. I watch the horrifying video of the armed vehicle driving through the protestors, and I am sure of what I am seeing. These people will die in seconds, I scream to myself. A Canadian friend comments, after she watches the same video, “I could see Tiananmen Square repeated.” Then I wonder, how can an
Egyptian do such a vile act to another Egyptian? Where can it have come from this degree of indifference to human lives?

In the meantime SCAF, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, says that the armed forces had no real ammunition on them. Can this be true? Either SCAF considers Egyptians totally naïve, or maybe, a faint chance exists that SCAF is saying the truth. I play devil’s advocate. If they are saying the truth, then who shot these six victims—in addition to those who were run over or trampled on?

Speaking at a press conference Wednesday, General Adel Emara, of SCAF said, “Soldiers driving armored vehicles were trying to avoid civilians who were throwing stones and Molotov cocktails at them.” In all fairness, I did watch the armed vehicle, though originally speeding very rapidly, halt before its victims. Of course, there must be other split seconds where this vehicle must have run over its 16 victims. And I also watched protestors throw objects at the screeching vehicle; whether they were Molotov bombs or rocks was not very clear.

The general told journalists, however, that the army’s doctrine does not permit soldiers to use armored vehicles to assault individuals, adding that this is not even allowed against an enemy let alone Egyptians. “When civilians began setting army tanks and nearby cars on fire, chaos broke out. Thank God the soldiers didn’t have live ammunition or else it would have been a real catastrophe,” said Emara.

If the generals are telling the truth, then they must offer an explanation about how protesters were shot and by whom. An extensive investigation must take place and the instigators must be tried so that those who lost their lives are vindicated—whether those responsible are civilians or officers. But will we ever know the truth? I’m trying to use my brain and logic here, trying not to be biased, but even the apparently evident is open to interpretation.

In Al Ahram on October 13, 2011, George Isaac, the Kefaya group activist, and a Copt, attributed Sunday’s events to a breakdown and chaos in security, which is why one cannot put the blame on the Copts or the protestors; we can blame only the lack of security. He also states that there is a huge amount of ammunition and weaponry available on the streets in Cairo.
What George Isaac is saying doesn’t defend SCAF, but it definitely doesn’t accuse it of directly killing the protestors either. It clearly says that security does not exist and that is why Egyptians, be they Copts or Islamists, reacted the way they did.

Was excessive and brutal force used against civilians? Absolutely. Could this massacre have been evaded? Definitely. But could protestors have come prepared to attack? Yes. And have protestors ever attacked armed forces’ buildings, vehicles, and personnel before? Of course. Can personnel and ordinary human beings fear for their lives? Again, yes—it’s human nature.

I’m very disturbed and wary. Egyptians should not be dying at the hands of other Egyptians whether they are Christians, Salafis, Muslims, soldiers, or police officers.

At the same time Egyptians think alike and behave alike. If soldiers err, then believe me protestors can err, too. If protestors can become violent, soldiers can become violent, too. The years of destitution that Egyptians have endured have left them lacking in many respects. And before we can blame one against the other, let’s educate ourselves in becoming better Egyptians—non-biased, respectful of one another, not easily swayed into violent actions, and mainly loving of one another.

Let’s mourn the loss of lives; and simultaneously, mourn Egypt’s state of affairs.
Can Egyptians handle democracy?
October 16, 2011

A whiff of optimism settled on my shoulder when I learned that Magy Mahrous is running for a seat in the Egyptian National Assembly—voting will take place November 28, 2011, and the inaugural session for the newly elected assembly will be January 22, 2012. My first reaction was, “Now you are talking.” If a few Magys run for the Assembly seats, then Egypt is on the right track.

Magy Mahrous exemplifies today’s young adult Egyptian, indeed, a new breed of Egyptians: broadminded, just, ethically and morally correct, and devoted to Egypt. She has no financial quests, and more importantly, she is not after power per se. That doesn’t mean she doesn’t have the stamina to pursue a cause until she fulfills it; quite the contrary, if anyone has the will to attain the rights of others and campaign with relentless perseverance, it is Magy. But most of all, Magy is running because she cares about Egypt and its road to recovery. She is the perfect candidate for the assembly.

Magy represents Tahrir. She exemplifies the new Egyptian, the one who spent 18 days in Tahrir and managed to oust Mubarak in the process—those who stood their ground and fought for their rights. She
believes in the basic rights of all Egyptians: “bread, freedom, dignity, and social justice,” the basic demands of the revolution.

Magy is campaigning under the slogan, “Like all Egyptians, I’m concerned with education and the environment.” She explains that environmental issues are an integral part of her electoral platform. “We have been enjoying a free ride for the past 30 years. It is time to change course. It is time for the environment to be a priority, and for that we need a paradigm shift,” she tells Egypt Independent.¹¹

Magy has the vision and the experience; she has executed many humanitarian projects in Egypt and other stricken societies such as in Basra, Iraq, and Darfour, Sudan, especially in the fields of education and health. Magy believes that poverty stems from the lack of health, lack of education, and lack of housing; “When these are your ultimate dreams when they’re actually your basic rights, there’s something seriously wrong,” she continues.

Another reason for my elation came because no other revolutionists went that route. Those standing on the sideline criticize the runners, but none is willing to go a step further and become truly involved. But if Magy is willing to run, then others will be willing to do so, too.

With regard to the assembly election, activists have been against ex-National Democratic Party members, who have metamorphosed in form and migrated to other parties; against the Freedom and Justice Party for dominating the scene; and even against presidential candidates who side with SCAF. However, few have taken the initiative to involve themselves in the Egyptian political arena of today. This is why Magy’s participation is crucial.

And other strong activists have declared their intention to run, too—Amr Hamzawy and Mahmoud Salem. Soon other liberals will be enticed to run.

Though I see a glimmer of hope, I am still worried about the parliamentary elections and the forces that will be dominating the Egyptian street. Millions of Egyptians are not educated, at least politically, if at all. A voice will direct them towards the right and another voice will direct

them towards the left. They may even be bought by tokens of “thank you’s.” These simple Egyptians will vote as others will tell them to vote.

Certain candidates have the means to reach the millions of novice voters. Those millions will not be able to differentiate between candidates, or tell that Magy Mahrous, and others like her, are their best representatives. This is why Magy and her peers must work feverishly to reach their constituencies.

I began immediately to campaign for Magy, getting people in Maadi, where she plans to run, to know her worth and how hard she will work for them. But during the constitution’s referendum that took place in March 2011, I encouraged many folks to say no. And they did, including Safia, my mother’s caregiver. She went ahead and did just that: said no. At that point, I was extremely proud of her since she had not voted ever before, which was a great achievement in itself. She stood her ground at the polling station and refused to have anyone sway her.

But now I question my action. I should have explained to Safia the pros and cons of voting either way, then left it up to her to decide. I needed to elaborate on the merits and demerits of voting with a yay or a nay. Even I need to educate myself in the fundamentals of politics.

How many Egyptians will handle election in the same manner as Safia? Millions. And without education and awareness, it will take time to get the best representatives in the assembly.

Starting his public campaign, El Baradie said that the first National Assembly we get would not be a perfect one. The second will be better, and the third will be even better. I tend to agree with him. However, we will have to work hard to educate Egyptians on political affairs and the happenings in the political arena. And this is a painstaking task.

Magy is running in Maadi. Safe elections, Magy.

In spite of Magy’s will and strengths, she does not win Maadi. Magy had too much working against her: her gender, woman; and her religion, Copt.

Interestingly, neither women nor Copts voted for Magy. Moderates, women, and Copts knew ahead that Magy didn’t have a chance, so they voted for
a moderate Muslim, a man, someone who had a chance against the radical Islamists. They voted strategically.

Magy, in retrospect, is glad she didn’t win the seat and is disappointed in what has become of the parliament. The Egyptian parliament, before it was annulled, exhibited how backwards it was. Had Magy won the seat, she would have been unable to fight the Islamic torrent that prevailed—Magy is nothing like those who won.

And this is the most disappointing matter in all this: democracy may not be serving Egypt well. Because of democracy, or in spite of it, the suitable candidate is shunned while the inexperienced wins.

Magy should try again, not because she will win the next round either, but it is only if women, Copts, and moderates persevere will Egyptians change and ultimately elect the best Egyptian to represent them even if it is a Copt or a woman.

Edging towards democracy

Did the Egyptian Revolution spark the Occupy Movement?

October 23, 2011

On February 11, at the peak of the Egyptian Revolution, a memorable photo of Tahrir Square filled to the brim with millions of Egyptian activists circled the world—a photo that will remain in memory forever. Egyptians watched, and the world watched too struck by the Egyptian stamina and fortitude.

The Arab Spring began in Tunisia, but the Egyptian modest-in-size but mammoth-in-effect Tahrir Square drew a colossal following that reverberated around the world. Soon afterwards pockets of revolutions emerged around the Arab World—Yemen, Bahrain, Syrian, and Libya. And soon too we saw sparks of activism in European countries such as Greece and Spain. And finally the Occupy Movement has arrived in the US, and all over the world, starting on the steps of Wall Street but quickly escalating to other cities and spreading to towns, banks, and even schools.
Did this sudden emergence of dissatisfaction have anything to do with Egypt? Did the Egyptian Revolution play a role in inciting dis-sidence across the world?

I’m becoming more and more inclined to believe that not only did the Egyptian gutsy revolution leave the world reeling but that it also inspired other activists to react similarly, first against tyrants but soon afterwards against rich tycoons, corporate rule, increasing student debt, failing health care systems, and much more. The tenacity of the Egyptians was empowering. And the immediate thought of sufferers everywhere was: we can do it too—from single individuals who crave justice to nations that want tyrants stamped out.

Many articles, footage, and tweets talk about how the Egyptian Revolution sparked just that. Talking about Occupy Wall Street, Michael Moore referenced the Egyptian Revolution in his tweet saying, “OMG! A few cops joined in the march tonite! A 1st! 2 of them were even singing along w/ the crowd! In Egypt, when cops joined in... game over,” proof that the world watched Tahrir with careful scrutiny.

The short documentary by Jon Alpert and Matthew O’Neill’s In Tahrir Square was short-listed as an Academy Award Oscar potential. And an Egyptian movie, 18 Days, was screened at the Vancouver International Film Festival. Jenny Uechi of The Vancouver Observer who watched the film says, “It was clear that some people came to the film with another protest on their mind. “Occupy Wall Street” was mentioned in hushed tones... As one organizer told the Vancouver Observer last month, the New York protests are modeled on the mass demonstrations in Egypt’s Tahrir Square.”

David Deitz in “What Occupy Wall Street Should Learn from the Arab Spring” also comments, “The Egyptian people have displayed moments of profound dexterity,” and recommends that Occupy Wall Street learn from Egypt’s successes and failures by quickly moving to tighten and condense their overall message.

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Interestingly too, the Egyptian experience is providing insight to the American demonstrators. Spencer Akerman in his post in Danger Room “Egypt’s Top ‘Facebook Revolutionary’ Now Advising Occupy Wall Street,” on October 18 talks about Ahmed Maher of the Egyptian April 6 Youth Movement.15

The protesters in New York’s Zuccotti Park — and their offshoots around the country — often cite the mass demonstrations earlier this year in Cairo’s Tahrir Square as their inspiration. Maher is one of the founders of the April 6 Youth, who used Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to galvanize Egyptians against President Hosni Mubarak. Recently, however, his attention has turned toward the US, where he’s been chatting online with Occupy activists. Those conversations center on practical advice from a successful Egyptian revolutionary. Usually, they occur through Facebook. Maher is in New York, and, for the first time, the conversations happened face-to-face.

It is becoming obvious that ruling powers and money machines whether in Egypt or the world need to sit up and listen to the laypeople. If some are becoming wealthier while the majority is unable to go to school let alone pay bills, then something is wrong.

Yet in spite of the resonating glory, the Egyptian revolution is facing an impasse. A revolution with no leader and no logical future vision or rationale is bound to face turbulence.

The same can be said about the Occupy Movement. Where is it heading? How far can it go with a limited budget and a sporadic outlook? Does it have a leader? How far can it go on criticism alone? It must find a clear path to take it towards its goal.

Has the Egyptian revolution influenced the activists around the world? Absolutely. But the Occupy Movement may falter like the Egyptian one if nothing is done soon to unite the movements around the world. As James Zoghby says in The Huffington Post of October 22, “Whether in Egypt or America, it takes organization to win.” 16

Egypt today: Are we back to square one?

October 27, 2011

One incident of torture a day is bad enough, but today we had two—two unnecessary deaths in addition to the aftermath of a dubious sentence.

Essam Ali Atta was sentenced to two years in jail by the military court on February 25, 2011, for a common crime. Essam was serving his sentence at the maximum-security ward at Torra Prison. The prison officials attempted to punish Atta for apparently smuggling a mobile SIM card into his cell. Today he died because he was brutally tortured.

In the current climate, such happenings don’t take long to reach the public and create a frenzy of dismay amidst ordinary citizens. I don’t know what the ordinary (and just) countries do when someone imprisoned manages to smuggle an item into prison. However, in Egypt, he is brutalized until he dies.

Simultaneously, another Egyptian, Moaatz Anwar Sulaiman in Al Sheikh Zayed District is shot by two officers—four times. He drops dead. The reason for this action is still unknown. Folks in the vicinity try to get to the officers. They burn their police car, and the officers flee to the station where other officials protect them. The story is yet to be
verified, so I can’t vouch for its validity. However, twitter is adding this story as yet more evidence against the corrupt system.

These happenings occur on the eve of the ruling in Khaled Saeed’s murder. The two corporal officers who beat him to death get seven years each, a very lenient sentence some say; again the public wails “corruption” and cries for justice.

Egyptians are devastated and furious. And to the public, the culprit in all these scenarios is one body: SCAF (the Supreme Council of Armed Forces). Though SCAF had no direct hand in the brutality, people are blaming SCAF for all the wrongdoings; they also blame SCAF for allowing the police force to handle prisoners in such a vicious manner.

Only if SCAF were totally incompetent would it support such actions. Doesn’t SCAF know that in seconds the news infiltrates the whole Egyptian society let alone the whole world and creates venom and repugnance? Even the Libyan Council today is promising to bring Gaddafi’s murderers to trial. Doesn’t SCAF know that with another Khaled Saeed, we will have yet a second revolution in Tahrir tomorrow? That we are back to square one?

If SCAF is living in the past, then SCAF deserves what it is about to get: a harsh slap of fury and abhorrence. The Minister of Interior should resign over the death of Essam Atta. The minister is the head of this official body, and he must accept blame. In all civilized countries this must happen, so that people understand they are not living in a jungle where barbaric rule dominates.

However, there is another way to consider this. SCAF is in charge, but Egyptians themselves have not changed their way of thinking whether they are in the police force or the army, on the street, in the factory, or at the school or the university. Rodney King is a case in point; I don’t think the Americans would have blamed the president or the CIA as the main culprit in this incident.

The public has yet to understand that many of us are still living under the old regime and its ways. It doesn’t mean we are the old regime; it means that it will take time until we shed off our dusty and dirty skin and replace it by the new and pristine one.
Edging towards democracy

We are definitely back to square one. Khaled Saeed’s murder instigated the Egyptian Revolution. With the new wave of murders, I don’t doubt we will ignite a second phase. Maybe that’s what we need, so we can create a better tomorrow and overcome yesterday. Maybe it’s time to cut off all the arms of the past.

Today one tweet said, “Tomorrow in #Tahrir we will march towards #USA Embassy calling them to stop crackdown on their people …” during the Occupy Wall Street movement. I said, “That’s not fair. You can’t ask Egyptians amidst all these disasters to worry about Oakland.”

Nevertheless, after today’s event, I see Egyptians indeed going back to Tahrir tomorrow and creating a new wave of dissent for Moaatz, Essam, and Khaled. Egyptians need due process and logical repercussions.

Still, it’s going to be a tough call to start all over again.

To date, January 2013, we don’t have a clear verdict regarding what happened to Essam Atta—we are left to hypothesize and presume, as is the case with many of the events that hit Egypt.
Today, Egyptians abroad were encouraged to register their names at an electronic site in anticipation of voting electronically on the next three Egyptian votes: the National Assembly vote, the constitution vote, and the presidential vote. And Egyptians abroad are ecstatic. You could sense the buzz in the air.

Now, many hours after the site opened, people are still calling one another, text messaging friends and families, and trying their best to reach as many potential voters as possible. Emails have been circulating profusely. Facebook is humming with information on the instructions and who has registered and who is about to register. Appreciative, grateful, and relieved are all Egyptians abroad—a dramatic but positive change.

According to the Geo Dynamo site, Egyptians have ten days, November 10 to November 19, to register their names, so as to be able to vote on the various election events. All voters need their social insurance numbers—al raqm el qaumi—to be able to vote, in addition to their passports—expired passports work though.

I have lived abroad for decades. Prior to leaving Egypt, I had never voted and I never expected to vote. The notion of voting was so far...
Edging towards democracy

beyond my expectation that I hadn’t paid it much attention; who
would have thought that I’d live to see the day when I can vote in an
Egyptian election?

Now that it is indeed happening, the first thing that comes to mind
is a genuine sense of relief. An estimated 6.5 million Egyptians live
abroad, and assuming that 50% will vote, of which hopefully 80%
are sensible and rational, we are looking at approximately 2.5 million
Egyptians changing the balance towards a more moderate and secular
society. This is indeed a joyous moment.

True these are all hypothetical numbers, but logical nonetheless.

Of course, those Egyptians living in Saudi, Kuwait, and other Arab
countries will vote conservatively; however, many others live in Europe,
Australia, Canada, and the US. And even those living in the Arab coun-
tries will not necessarily mean they follow the Salafi movement. Some
of them will follow the rigid, fundamentalist movement, but others will
be liberal, too. Again, from this perspective, I am happy.

Bearing in mind that many Islamic movements are becoming pre-
dominant and explicitly vocal about their inflexible views and drastic
measures, I’m sure that the vote of Egyptians abroad will tilt the scale
towards a more secular assembly, and hence a moderate constitution.
Think about it: most Egyptians abroad have immersed themselves in
their new societies, and have come to appreciate democracy and bless
non-prejudiced views and non-biased opinions. The day they vote, they
will vote carefully, genuinely, and justly.

The second reason why I’m delighted is that this has been a hard-
fought battle. Tahrir had demanded voting to be extended to Egyptians
living abroad, and earlier on this demand was blatantly and bluntly
refuted as an impossible endeavor. Now that it has arrived, we as
Egyptians should cherish the accomplishment. We should enjoy the
success of their effort and pat ourselves on the back.

And the third reason why this is a good thing is the mere concept of
voting. The day has come when I can vote. I never thought of it as an
option. I will be very proud when I click on my mouse and submit my

17 Ahram Online. “New Govt Hotline for Egyptians Living Abroad.” October 5,
vote. I will do it slowly but surely. I may get teary-eyed at the magni-
tude of the moment, but I will savour it.

Amidst the doom and gloom we are surrounded by, we should be, yet again, able to see the good things that have been brought about after the revolution—allowing Egyptians abroad to vote is one of them. At this moment in time, in spite of the speculations and doubts, we should acknowledge this success—an exceptional feat.

I have yet to register, but I will definitely do it soon, and I’ll wait ever so patiently until I can vote. In the meantime I will study candi-
dates, understand the anticipated constitution, question platforms, and voice my concerns. I’ll also work hard to tell others about the good that a clean vote entails. I’ll try to make others understand how worth their while it is to vote for the best candidate. In the long run, this candidate will work for them and not for himself or herself.

It’s definitely a good day for Egypt.

My estimates were off by a wide margin. Approximately 100,000 expats voted in the first phase\textsuperscript{18}; the second and third phases were no better. The reason: many Egyptians living overseas don’t have Egyptian passports or Egyptian ID cards, so they didn’t vote.

Then voting was not done electronically. Egyptians sent their voting forms to their embassies.

The second revolutionary wave

November 19, 2011

In March 2011, Tahrir chose Essam Sharaf to form the first government after the revolution. By November, Tahrir denounced this government as incompetent and weak.

Tahrir Square, today, Friday, November 25, is a positive scene—a vibrant yet peaceful one. This follows a week of truly tragic turbulence.

Cairo and many other cities in Egypt saw, yet again, gruesome bloodshed last week—many died of asphyxiation as a massive amount of tear gas was hurled at the activists. The rampant but severe brutality remains unexplained. Many lost their eyesight from birdshot and rubber bullets wounds aimed accurately at the activists’ eyes; I kept visualizing the police force envisioning humans as target signs. One in particular left his mark on me. Ahmed Harara lost his right eye on January 28, and he lost his left one on November 19.

I find his perseverance quite mindboggling. Harara represents the epitome of self-sacrifice. I love Egypt wholeheartedly, but once bitten twice shy. I wouldn’t have ventured into the Tahrir arena the second time round. But who am I to compare myself to such resilient and tenacious activists?
And now that Essam Sharaf’s government’s resignation has been accepted—with the approval of the Square—in comes Kamal El Ganzouri with his new government—with the disapproval of the Square. Tahrir has clearly voiced its discontent with the choice. Kamal El Ganzouri is old and incapable, they say. And they have already stamped the new prime minister with illegitimacy and flagged his government as incapable, even before its inception. And clearly this view will make it harder for the new government to do any good if it actually can do any.

But how could the activists have reacted otherwise, I ask. According to them, SCAF remains loyal to Mubarak. They perceive its actions as totally against Egypt. This is why they can’t see the newly appointed prime minister as anything but yet another puppet in the hands of SCAF. And Al Ganzouri will definitely fail—just about any prime minister will fail.

Amidst all this, the elections for the National Assembly begin Monday, November 28. Some Egyptians are against the elections—much too soon, they say. Some will stay away for fear of harassment, and maybe even retaliation. And others will avoid the election out of sheer gloom and despair—to them, nothing will work. But many will indeed vote, hoping that the election will be the first step towards a more secure and peaceful Egypt. The jury is still out on whether the elections will lead the way to stability or disaster. Nothing is guaranteed in today’s Egypt.

Surprisingly, in this second revolutionary wave, the remaining 80 million or so Egyptians are going about their business in an almost normal fashion. Sure people are worried and angry, and sympathetic towards the heroic souls in Tahrir and Mohammed Mahmoud Street, the street that saw the bulk of the turmoil. And ordinary Egyptians are seen weeping impulsively from the brutality inflicted on other Egyptians. However, they are going to school and work; they are socializing and even throwing wedding parties. This time around a sense of complacency and acceptance exists.

On one hand, it is a good thing that life has not been disrupted as it did during January and February when the revolution exploded.
Then everything was shut down including banks and schools. Curfew restricted people’s movement to a few hours a day—8 a.m. till 3 p.m. Life was practically on hold.

But on the other hand, this blasé attitude expresses a sentiment that is disturbing. Tweeter Nevine Baligh said, “I realize it’s been rough on all of us and some still persevere protesting, but not every1 has the same instability tolerance threshold.” I find this quote quite profound and insightful—not all Egyptians can take this level of agitation and disturbance. After my tweet that acclaimed the Tahrir as a full house, Mamina, another tweeter said, “And then?” People are unable to see the light at the end of the tunnel—yet.

So what now?

Events change and take twists and turns by the hour. One minute matters are under control; and the next the world is tumbling around us.

The elections may get us quicker onto the right path, but I am not quite sure. In all fairness, I’m not sure of anything anymore.

The Tahrir activists are not ready to call it quits—they insist that SCAF step down. By the same token, I’m sure that SCAF will not give in so easily. Even if SCAF might have given up power before last week’s events, it won’t now because the activists will be after the members and calling for judgment and redemption for those who died. SCAF remembers what happened to Mubarak after he was ousted. In the meantime, Egyptians have cornered themselves big time.

The past few weeks have truly left Egypt and Egyptians in a dreadful bind.
Sexual Harassment in Egypt
November 27, 2011

The Battle of Mohammed Mahmoud Street, a side street adjacent to Tahrir Square and housing the Ministry of Interior, ensues. Around 36 Egyptians are pronounced dead of asphyxiation and rubber bullets, and hundreds are injured. These clashes are one of many in a long chain of clashes that erupt in Cairo and other major cities between the protestors and the armed forces.

Mona El Tahawy doesn’t really need an introduction. If you follow her articles in The Guardian and elsewhere, you would know that she rarely stays put but is usually on a plane between countries, voicing her adamant views. Still, if you don’t know her, Mona El Tahawy is an Egyptian-born, from Port Said, award-winning columnist and an international public speaker on Arab and Muslim issues. She also talks about the rights of women and other marginalized groups. She is based in New York.

Mona El Tahawy was captured during the events in Tahrir and Mohammed Mahmoud Street on November 23. Beaten and sexually assaulted, she was detained for 12 hours by the Egyptian police. The American-Egyptian said: “I am speaking out to shame them for what
they did. As I was being assaulted, it was as if I was set on by a bunch of beasts.”

Mona had both her arms broken, and she tweeted a photo of her casts. “The past 12 hrs were painful and surreal, but I know I got off much much easier than so many other Egyptians,” she wrote, a notion that many Egyptians share with her.

The assault on Mona by the police force is atrocious. No woman, or man for that matter, should endure such brutality or humiliation. However, the police force isn’t the only group that considers women a free-for-all commodity if one falls in their grip. Mona was a victim similar to many.

How does this happen? Amidst chaos and destruction, when people are isolated from social norms, egged on by comrades, or made to operate off the beaten path (as in the Abu Gharib detention camps, for instance) people change into animals. This is not an aberration on the part of army guards or a police force; it is a common act in the Egyptian police force, as well as in other police forces, but it occurs elsewhere too, even in the best of places—the Tahrir Square, for instance.

Have abusive incidents escalated lately or has this always been the case? Has it got anything to do with the current situation in Egypt? Is documented exposure to such events becoming more commonly available? Has social media anything to do with all this? My response to all the above questions is affirmative. In any case, as with all vices, instability and insecurity propagate atrocities.

Mona is not the only one to have been sexually assaulted; while covering events in Tahrir Square, France 3 TV reporter Caroline Sinz too was assaulted. “I was beaten by a group of youngsters and adults who tore my clothes.” Then they molested her in a way that “would be considered rape,” she said. “Some people tried to help me but failed. I was lynched. It lasted three quarters of an hour before I was taken out. I thought I was going to die.” (Chew, Kristina. Care2. November 25, 2011)

Then we have the case of Lara Logan, of the CNN from a while back. In Tahrir amidst the frenzy that broke after Mubarak’s stepping down, a group of at least 200 men beat her, pinched her and tore at her clothes in a 40-minute attack that only ended when a group of women came to her aid. 20

On a more positive note, women have definitely put their foot down and said enough is enough. On Twitter, many women, including Mona El Tahawy herself, have been voicing their disgust at “some” men in the Square, not because it is the Tahrir per se, because Tahrir is mainly very safe, but because it is a spot where an extensive group of men and women congregate.

It seems that many men had thought that women in Tahrir are up for grabs, no pun intended. And the Tahrir women reacted. First, they came up with a twitter account called harassmap “Catch an abuser.” Through that site, they map out where the harassers are and guide one another on how to avoid them.

But it is still happening as evidenced by many tweets: “Sexual harassment was over the top yesterday. Our beloved youth has 2 do smth in-order to protect women and girls” (SarahKadry). Another one said, “An organized harassing gang focuses on one woman, walks behind her, and prods her as though by mistake for a 100 metres or so, passes her by, and then another one takes over”(harassmap).

The funniest but feistiest tweet said, “Today’s harassment should not stop you from showing up in Tahrir tomorrow. Bring your nail file, have your pins ready in your purse, and the moment the harasser comes close to you, stop him from being fertile anymore.”

What happened to Mona El Tahawy is a disgrace since those that were supposed to protect her were the ones who assaulted her. However, other women in Tahrir suffer assault and harassment at the hands of ordinary people. It is a human phenomenon not a police vendetta. It is also a mob-like mentality. And I find it unlikely that the officers would have sanctioned their soldiers to do so.

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However, given the outspoken nature of the young women in Tahrir, their will to voice their indignation, and with voices such as Mona El Tahawy to back them up, I’m sure that sexual harassment in Egypt, as other forms of illegal assault, will come to an end—and the sooner the better.

Yes, this too shall pass.

Sexual harassment and assaults, on the rise in Egypt, have become a strategy to discourage women from participating in protests in Tahrir.
The Islamists are here (Part I)
December 2, 2011

A twist in Egypt’s future is in the making here. Many posts in 2012 will be
predominantly about the emergence of the Islamic movement.

The term “Salafi” was brand new to Egyptians at this point. Hardly anyone
had heard of the Salafis before.

The preliminary results of the Egyptian elections for the
National Assembly seats are in. The Islamists, mainly the Muslim
Brotherhood, and, more often than expected, the Salafis, have arrived.

A few years back, when Gamal Mubarak was being flagged as a
potential candidate for the presidency, and Egyptians disapproved, I too,
said that I would hate having Gamal as president. To have Mubarak
contrive to maneuver his son into power and reign was deplorable. But
I also said that, despite this, if I had to choose between Gamal Mubarak
and the Muslim Brotherhood, which I predicted would come to play
a major role in the post-Mubarak era, I would have chosen the former.

But the elections have clearly identified what most other Egyptians
want. Ordinary Egyptians, when given the freedom to choose, chose a
predominately Islamic assembly. This is because in the last few decades,
Egyptians had veered towards becoming a conservative society.
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This conservatism emerged in consequence to several changes in the Egyptian society. First, though Nasser did not encourage conservatism, the nationalistic outlook that he did encourage meant the disappearance of the multi-ethnic urban society, which led to a closed and more traditional one. Gone were the Jews, the Italians, and the Greeks leaving Egypt essentially Islamic. Then, as the economy floundered in Egypt and work opportunities diminished, Egyptian expats headed to the Gulf States; they brought back the scarved attire and the conservative mentality. And as hope for a dignified and respectable “today” got lost, Egyptians worked towards a better “after”—life after death. All this translated into a more religious society.

All this led eventually to Islamic dominance. And since democracy was the aim behind the revolution, then Egyptians must adhere to the wishes and will of the majority even if millions are disappointed in the results.

A truly democratic process dominated the election, so there is no room for grappling. It was not fixed; it went quite smoothly and fairly, and democracy has presided. And the Islamists have come out at the other end as a winning force with the majority of the seats going to their parties.

Not only are Islamists exemplified in the Freedom and Justice Party, the Muslim Brotherhood, but also in the radical Nour Party, known as the Salafis. The word Salafi comes from salaf meaning before. This group goes by the rules of the olden days and does not see any good in the ways of today.

Yes, the Egyptian Block (the liberal group), is doing well, but it isn’t going to do well enough to play a pivotal role in the livelihood of Egyptians, writing the constitution, or choosing the president.

Since the lesser evil, Gamal Mubarak, has long gone, moving on is a must. How will Egyptians acclimatize themselves to this new reality? When the dust settles, what kind of Egypt will emerge? What can the secular, the worldly, and the unbiased do to counteract this new wave of conservatism and establish an equilibrium that they can live by?

First, the next round is going to be of the essence. The constitution will be written via 100 participants, half of who are members of the
National Assembly, and the other half are from various scholarly and judicial backgrounds. This latter group can balance matters and aid in the creation of a constitution that is fair to all Egyptians. The bottom line is that the assembly will ultimately be replaced in a few years, but the constitution will be here to stay.

Second, those who fear the Islamists must try to play a major role in the upcoming presidential election. The Tahrir Square group is known for its liberalism and open mindedness. They can be a leading force in the next round of elections, but they are not utilizing this body of power wisely. Take Tahrir only three or four days before the parliamentary elections—it was a fireball; Tahrir called for the denouncement of these elections, with some members calling for a boycott, when just about everyone else knew it was a fait accompli. Had Tahrir realized that the elections were a done deal and worked with instead of against this reality, Egyptians might have had another option or organized group to follow instead of having one force—the Islamists—aiding them in their choices.

If the president is an Islamist, with a true and strong adherence to Islam, substantial changes will take place if not immediately but definitely in the long run, and life as Egyptians have come to know it will dissipate. The changes may kill tourism, limit women’s attire, change the banking system as we know it, curb the lives of Christians, and much more.

The next time round—during the presidential election—a wider and stronger presence must override discrepancies and unwavering protocols. Egyptians must forget their differences and forget other issues that may be important but not as foreboding as an Islamic president. They should work on highlighting the appropriate president, the one who will give each Egyptian, whether a woman, a man, a Christian or a Muslim, the equal rights that Egyptians have aspired for.

For ten months, Egyptians mocked the Mubaraks and focused on yesterday but never came up with solid ideas for change. Now they have to worry about the future. If Mubarak was the worst president, I wonder what the next one would be—a reality we must heed.
Update: December 4. Although the elections in general seemed to have gone smoothly, some ridings suffered rigging, others showed videos of trashed forms. On December 5, the recount/repeat will start for the same regions.
"That’s the most expensive vote I have ever made," exclaimed my daughter after she sent her vote off to the Egyptian Embassy in Ottawa rush mail, at a cost of $27. My daughter had never voted in an Egyptian election before; neither had I for that matter, but for both of us, the opportunity to do so was phenomenal.

However, the voting process for Egyptians abroad was filled with trials and tribulations. The forms were made available only 72 hours before the closing date (time); and since the deadline fell on a weekend, the possibility that my ballot would have reached its destination in time to be part of the count was dubious.

Then came the repeats, and this time neither my daughter nor I voted. Egyptians abroad had two short days to send their votes off to their embassies, and again the deadline fell on a Sunday. Why bother, we said? And this was the feeling of many Egyptians overseas.

I can understand that elections for those abroad was not perfect the first time round, and persevering seemed a futile and mute effort for the repeat. But what about Egyptians in Egypt? In particular, why did moderate Egyptians not go back to the polls the second round?
Between the primary and the repeat vote, the results came out naming the Islamists as the dominating majority. At that point, the media went ballistic, sensationalizing matters to extremes and bringing dozens of Salafis on board to have them explain their guidelines and expectations. The staggeringly horrific views of the Salafis produced a level of anguish and despair in the general public. Harrowing notions on women’s liberty and attire, Copts’ rights, and artistic endeavours, such as the work of Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz, left Salafis/Islamists in murky waters.

It goes without saying that the Islamists’ views remain radically different from what Egyptians are used to. And yet, Islamists have enjoyed their moment in the limelight, immediately after the primary rounds, pumping out those intrinsically wrong beliefs for Egyptians to fathom. Obviously, the Islamists, themselves, share the responsibility with the media in digging their own grave. Misled by the media, they entrenched themselves further focusing on superficial matters and leaving the core issues—poverty, rights, freedom, education, medical systems—unexplained. They came across as trivial, superficial, and ignorant.

A halo of mistrust emerged, daunting moderate Egyptians further. But their reaction was clear: it’s a hopeless case. Since the Islamists are here with a majority, my voice won’t matter; let it go to the dogs.

The second reason why Egyptians in general failed to show up for the repeats is that the first round was extremely exhausting. Neither the election council nor the public itself thought that the turnout would be that high. The lineups were dreadful, yet voters stood their ground and lined for, in many cases, hours on end. When these zealous folks realized it was futile, they didn’t want to stand in a queue for that many hours again.

The third reason is that, in spite of the high turnout and the joyous feeling of belonging that engulfed Egyptians, in many cases, people’s votes were neglectfully mishandled. Though most ridings were diligent and meticulous, footage of forms spilled on the ground, of messy handling of votes, and of devious actions on behalf of certain parties outside ridings emerged. Again, why bother, they said?
This is a real shame since elections epitomizes freedom. An election that is not rigged, in spite of some scuffles and some messiness, is still an amazing sign of freedom and independence, a sign that just a few years ago was unheard of in Egypt.

What’s more, the second round brought many positive signs. Dr. Abdel Moneim El Shahhat of Alexandria, of the Nour Party, conceded to his moderate opponent, a truly remarkable feat for liberalists against radical Islamists. The second success story lies in the Nasr City riding, which gave its voices to two liberalists in their thirties.

I wish more moderate Egyptians had gone to vote the second round. I wish they hadn’t lost hope so quickly. However, not all is lost. Only nine regions in Egypt have gone to the polls. Many other regions will have their voting phase on Wednesday and Thursday, December 14 and 15. If the interim between the first and the second voting in the first round gave us two completely overturned ridings, then maybe we can continue this campaign against the Islamists and come out at the other end with a more balanced parliament.

Liberalists in the remaining ridings: do your part. Pursue a liberal, moderate and free Egypt.
Having just arrived in Cairo, I sense a change in the mood of Egyptians. It’s been eleven months since the revolution, and what grave months they’ve been.

Generally, I’m thrilled when I head off to Egypt for the winter. It’s vacation time, which includes relaxation and breaks from teaching and marking. I also greatly enjoy the socializing and dynamics—Egyptians love life and are easy going by nature, in spite of the hardships they incur. This time round though, I am full of trepidations and anticipation—this last year wasn’t an ordinary year by any standard.

On any given day, Cairo is in chaos. Congested and clogged streets, noise and air pollution, overflowing garbage, and disgruntled folks shouting vociferously at one another are all a regular feature of the Cairo scene. Today you recognize that things have worsened. The streets seem narrower with even more cars double and triple parked—honks as loud as ever. Traffic has deteriorated even further—something I never imagined could happen but true nonetheless, while drivers have become more defiant and even more reckless. Pollution is clearly visible with smog hovering closer. But most importantly, the level of discontent and irritation has heightened.
The educated, the upper middle class, and the well read, though optimistic, tell you that there is no other option but to stay the course and pursue the revolutionary path to freedom. By the same token, the uneducated, the economically challenged, and the physical labourers—trades people, taxi drivers, and small shop owners—are exhausted and spent; they can’t fathom why the activists are pursuing SCAF’s downfall (the Supreme Council of Armed Forces), denouncing the new government and its prime minister, or becoming perennial demonstrators.

Quite unfortunately, I arrived in Cairo amidst yet another standoff between the armed forces and the protestors. The latter had decided to strategically shift from Tahrir Square to a nearby street housing the Ministerial Cabinet Building, thereby obstructing Ganzouri’s newly sworn-in cabinet from entering its own building except by a side entrance. A three-week standoff in front of an official office spelled disaster and made a confrontation inevitable.

This time the clashes were severe, turning many more Egyptians against the army even further. Ten months ago, Egyptians were unable to decide SCAF’s true identity: is it with the revolution? Is it with Mubarak? Or is it true to itself only? They also wondered if SCAF had the intention of leaving power and returning to its barracks. But now due to the current round of uncalled for brutality, the results are in: SCAF is hated as much as Mubarak was. And the majority of Egyptians believe SCAF is here to stay.

In clashes reminiscent of Mubarak’s later days, several have died and many were injured. In particular the footage of beaten up women dragged by their hair, stomped on and assaulted, has left its mark on Egyptians. These images are all what Egyptians are talking about today—they are horrified, as they should be. One clip went viral. It depicts a seemingly unconscious and non-threatening abaya-clad woman dragged and hurled to the ground, beaten by batons, and stomped on the chest, her top ripped apart exposing her blue bra.

Egyptians don’t accept humiliation and degradation easily, more especially if that ill-treated victim is a woman. And the video of the “blue bra” as it was dubbed has led to an acute sense of disgust at the powers in charge.
If the aim behind these December attacks was to control the street, then they have backfired. Even more demonstrations have occurred. And thousands of Egyptian women from all walks of life have gone to the streets asking for the downfall of SCAF.

Every now and then an innocent Egyptian receives the “royal treatment” at the hands of one force or another—be it the army or the police, and the footage goes global. We’ve seen what Khaled Saeed’s photos did. These photos of a man battered to death were instrumental in speeding Mubarak’s ousting. And the “blue bra” footage may cause similar permanent damage, ultimately changing Egypt’s course yet again.

Clearly, things cannot remain the way they are for long. Something has to give; I can’t foresee SCAF accepting its own downfall; SCAF will not leave power until it can hand the country over to an authority that would not cause SCAF’s demise—that is, if it does hand over power. Simultaneously the revolutionaries are more adamant and more relentless in their expectations. Clearly the forces at play have no intention of negotiating a peaceful resolution to the current dilemma. In the meantime, Egypt spirals downwards.

Turbulent waters will rock my optimism this visit. It looks like a stormy winter.
An open letter to Egyptian Islamists

December 30, 2011

This is an open letter to Egyptian Islamists: Muslim Brotherhood members; the Wahabis, aka the Salafis—those who believe in yester ways; the PGPVG (the Promotion of Good and the Prevention of Vice Group); the Horayia and Adala Party; the El Nour Party; and every other emerging Islamic faction.

Dear Fellow Egyptians:

I’m writing to congratulate you on winning the majority of Egyptian parliamentary seats. I give you credit; you took Egypt by storm. In fact, Egyptians keep asking themselves where you were all these years, but you seemed to have been there, somewhere—waiting. And you have arrived: my “chapeau” to you, as Egyptians would say.

However, with sweeping success come not only power but also grave responsibilities. And now that you are here to stay, the onus lies on you to fix, not destroy.

First, with the revolution, Egyptians gained the right to democracy, which is exactly what brought you to power. And a democracy is a democracy is a democracy. What goes for you will have to go for others, too.
In a democracy, minorities have as much right as the reigning majority. True, you have a resounding following, but the liberals, the secular, the Copts, and everyone who is used to Egypt as it was have the right to live in and enjoy a harmonious Egypt.

To enable this harmony, you will have to avoid restricting people’s freedoms or imposing rules on minorities. Remember: in a democracy no one single group can dictate the laws of the land, and every single citizen has the right to a free and safe haven.

Disappointingly, your basic guidelines revolve around restricting women: how they behave, what they wear, if they drive, and, most importantly, how chaste and pure they are. No one in the whole world is as obsessed with women as you are. I suggest that you ignore women somewhat—let them be; whether they are wearing an abaya, a hijab, or not is a non-issue. These are trivial matters that won’t create a dignified, democratic, and just society.

Egypt needs a completely different approach. Extensive work is in order—on failing infrastructures, on congestion incomparable to any other part of the world, on a poverty-stricken society, on basics such as education and a decent medical system, and on dangerous pollution levels. These are only a few of the areas that call for immediate attention. And it will take you years of profound dedication to achieve a small portion of success with the above. And if you do, Egyptians and I will hail you as the best thing that happened to Egypt.

Even in yesterdays when prisons were filled to the brim, while media was censored, and while people felt choked out of their social and political rights, Egyptians were still free to function the way they pleased: they prayed five times a day, or went to Sunday mass, but also enjoyed parties, clubs (social and night), and resorts; they fasted Ramadan while others drank alcohol if they so desired; they walked around unveiled as I do or opted to wear the hijab. And the athletically inclined swam and enjoyed other sports. The bottom line is that Egyptians were free to do as they pleased, and they will continue to do so. This you cannot take from them.

Furthermore, Egyptians have been exposed to the outside world for a good fifty years—Sadat should be applauded for this. And now
they are even more acutely aware of the world surrounding them. And with social media bringing instant information, Egyptians will want to remain as knowledgeable and as informed as they have recently been. They will not accept imposed guidelines and censorship. This, again, you cannot take from them.

But after all this, I believe that you will not take drastic measures that would cause Egypt’s demise. I believe you care for a unified and peaceful Egypt, and you will resort to measures that will keep it as such. Simultaneously, Egyptians will anxiously await the results of your governing, and they will go to the streets again if they feel that their dignity and newfound freedom have been taken yet again from them.

Many Egyptians haven’t gone to Tahrir—yet. But I, and many others like me, will go to Tahrir if our rights as free citizens in a democratic society are curtailed, if we are forced to wear the hijab, or if we are told what to do in our daily lives. Tahrir will become, again, the venue that Egyptians seek.

I wish you all the best in bringing Egypt to the 21st Century.

Sincerely,

Azza Radwan Sedky (an Egyptian caring ever so much about Egypt)
Three kinds of thugs emerging in Cairo
January 5, 2012

“A group of thugs, or as they are called in Egypt baltageya, infiltrates the demonstration and clashes with protestors,” says an official commentator. “Those who threw the Molotov cocktails at the protestors are thugs,” says another. “The police force clamped down on the thugs,” states an announcer, validating the force’s dubious reaction; and the best one is, “No real Egyptian would act in this manner. It was the baltageya, i.e. thugs.”

Both the officials and the activists use the word “thug” to define an individual whom they don’t want to associate with. His misdeeds repel and embarrass. The thug makes his way into the midst of a standoff and spreads mayhem. He vandalizes and ransacks property, burns cars, throws rocks at the army and the activists simultaneously, and harasses female protestors. Most of the time we cannot fathom his intentions; he doesn’t seem to be siding with the activists or the armed forces, and definitely not with Egypt.

When an official cannot hold any one person responsible, the event crasher becomes a thug. And protestors use the term in a similar, loose fashion. Premeditated havoc or childish hooliganism, it is often not very
clear; what is clear is that thuggery is becoming an aspect of life in today’s Egypt.

But who is a thug exactly and how can he be identified? Does he wear a badge with the word “thug” embossed on it? Does he dress differently, and why is he so easily recognized? If two Egyptians, a thug and non-thug, are walking side by side, how do other Egyptians distinguish one from the other? And one very poignant question is, “But aren’t thugs Egyptians, too? And if they are, why are they so determined to destroy Egypt?” A truly interesting phenomenon those thugs are.

To spot a thug, we need to recognize three different types—all existing in Egypt today. The first is the easiest to identify—childish and young, a mere hoodlum, he is usually jobless, crass, and aimless. He appears at an event, totally oblivious of the cause but definitely there for the ride.

This thug is, in many ways, similar to thugs all over the world—the one that riots after his hockey team is defeated in Vancouver, burns cars and properties in London to express his discontent, or cheers as the Egyptian Scientific Institute, an irreplaceable treasure, burns.

This is the common thug, but at a different level, thuggery has escalated into a business in Egypt; the conspiracy theorists say that today it has become a vocation with manipulators, those who want to control Egypt, hiring thugs to devastate. According to these theories, thugs charge a costly per diem and lead others astray to intentionally wreak havoc. The goal of the manipulators is obvious: to keep Egypt in chaos so they can continue to reign, possibly for gain.

I watched Wael Elebrashi’s January 4 El Haqiqa program; his guest, a 13-year-old escapee from an orphanage, speaks out. Having fled with a few cell phones and some pocket money, he roams the streets. And in an Oliver Twist formula, he meets his own “Fagin,” who turns him into a thug; he’s taught how to make Molotov bombs and what to do with them; the payment: sustenance.

With an estimated 2 million “street children” living homeless and neglected lives, and with 40 percent of Egyptians living below the poverty line, this brand of thug is all too real. Street children grow up to become thugs, or as youngsters are recruited by thugs. They utilize
circumstances available to make a quick buck—be it by begging, becoming squeegee kids, or filling odd jobs. More often than not they perform any action, evil or malicious if need be, with profitable results.

The third thug is quite elusive. As much as Egyptians enjoy their newfound liberty and freedom, many confuse freedom and democracy with chaos and an I’ll-do-as-I-please attitude. Many Egyptians take to the streets assuming that if they block a road, barricade a building, or raid an office or a court, they are practicing their rights as free Egyptians. This is yet another thug.

Of course, this is the result of decades of living in a society that has been denied its right to democracy and self-rule.

Egypt will have to live with all these kinds of thugs until awareness, education, dignity, and freedom become realities.
This colder-than-normal winter, Cairenes are going about their business bundled up in warmer winter clothes, trudging as usual in congested traffic. Streets are packed with pedestrians, vehicles, carts, and donkey-led carriages. Together they all maneuver their ways amidst the clogged streets. And in turn, the streets bustle with activity as street vendors call out their products noisily to passersby. Life seems to move in a chaotic but uneventful fashion.

At face value, things seem to be calm, and they are. Standoffs, clashes, and other risky business are on hold. There are fewer of them. In essence, though, this is an unnatural lull, for Egyptians are awaiting events and anniversaries in keen anticipation.

On January 25, 2012, a whole year will have elapsed since the start of the Egyptian Revolution, and Egyptians are more disappointed than not. Nothing tangible has materialized; to them their world is pretty much the same, if not worse, than when Mubarak was in power. Egyptians had expected a swift and sweeping recovery, with visible and concrete improvements; these have not been the case.

The Egyptian Revolution called for “Bread, Freedom, and Social Justice.” As far as literal “bread” is concerned, it has become more
Edging towards democracy

expensive, though bread here really means the ability to feed oneself. Social justice is slow for sure—raising minimum wage to a decent level has yet to be finalized. Freedom seems to be the only goal achieved—Mubarak has been ousted. And freedom is immensely important, but . . .

Egyptians are agonizing not only over the state of their personal affairs and what seems to them an exorbitantly high cost of living, but also over the clashes and massacres that resulted in maimed, injured, and killed protestors. These clashes were so bizarre and so un-Egyptian, that the Egyptians themselves can hardly believe what they saw.

“How could this footage be of Egypt?” they say disbelievingly. Indeed, January 25 may turn out to be a bittersweet celebration after all—joyous and somber simultaneously.

What will happen on January 25, 2012? Will the event be celebratory and festive? Or will it be vengeful and retaliatory? How can we guarantee safety and nonviolence?

In all cases, the general public is worried and rightly so. While many Egyptians plan to attend the demonstration on January 25 in celebration, others are considering it the start of a new revolution since the first hasn’t accomplished its set goals. Many others intend to avoid the downtown core or hesitate about scheduling major events for that whole week. Obviously, congregating in huge numbers, even if the participants are in a festive mood, can lead to disaster.

Secondly, on January 23, the newly elected Egyptian parliament will meet for the first time. Even that is worrisome. A free democratic election it was; still, a predominantly Islamic assembly is not something to take lightly.

In the meantime, Mubarak’s trial is speeding along. Prosecutors are calling for the death penalty for the deposed president, his children, the former interior minister, and six of the latter’s assistants. After a slow start, the trial is proceeding swiftly, and it looks as though the intention is to announce sentences before the anniversary, which would make things even worse on January 25.

Although a just and fair trial is what all Egyptians want, sentencing day will be a precarious one. The pro-Mubaraks will denounce a harsh sentence. And the anti-Mubaraks will cry foul if it is a lenient one. It
is a no-win situation. And in the meantime, the conspiracy theorists have already come up with their own outcomes. Their view is that, yes, a harsh sentence will be delivered—to drug people into believing they have won—then the appeal will take forever with a more lenient end result.

In all cases, the sentencing will create a tumultuous reaction in Egypt. No sentence will satisfy Egypt as a whole. And Egyptians will go to the streets yet again.

Egyptians vehemently talk politics these days. Even the educated and the more aware are threatening to act if sentencing is not fair. “If the sentences do not match the crimes—the deaths of hundreds of youths—we will protest,” a superficially docile lady exclaims.

“Retribution will happen,” shouts another determined Egyptian. In addition, families of those slain have vowed to go to Torra Prison to personally avenge their children’s deaths. Though these threats are mere chatter, they do reflect the sentiments in Cairo today.

The lull Egyptians are enjoying is temporary. It is not a true indication of the state of things. It is actually the calm before the storm.

I hope Egypt weathers this current impending storm and comes through the other end safe and sound.

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Update: January 23—the lull continues; the only difference is that Mubarak’s trial has been extended beyond January 25.
Friend or Foe?
The Egyptian juxtaposition of love and hate
January 16, 2012

The Abou Hassira Moulid was cancelled this year due to the current instability in Egypt. A moulid is an annual religious festival marking the birthday of a religious person or saint. Nadia Abou El Magd describes the festival; “The annual moulid draws thousands of Israelis and other Jews who flock [to Demitiouh, Egypt] from all over the world to celebrate the birthday of a Moroccan Jew whom they revere as a holy man…the festival-cum-pilgrimage lasts for a week.” 21

The cancellation, though basically an appropriate precautionary measure, exhibits the underlying half-century aversion that Egyptians hold towards Jews in Israel and elsewhere. These sentiments are aimed at Zionists primarily, but many a time Egyptians can’t see the difference between one group and the other.

On another front, Palestinians have always enjoyed preferential treatment. While Mubarak remained passive towards the Israeli atrocities, the media, the publishing industries, art, cinema, television, and Egyptians in general, always sided with the Palestinians versus the Israeli adversary. This has been a given.

Lately though, the Egyptian media have focused on some baffling information coming out of Gaza. Palestinians have been utilizing the mayhem in Egypt to their advantage. Car theft has been rampant in Egypt since the Revolution. And Egyptians now have realized that hundreds of those stolen cars are appearing in Gaza.

Of course, car lifters have a hand in delivering the cars to the Palestinian border, but the Palestinians are no better. Palestinians, whether they are buyers, smugglers, or officials, are aware that these are stolen Egyptians cars smuggled into Gaza, and yet they don’t see the harm in such actions.

The smuggling of butane cylinders is another case in point. Egypt has seen protests and demonstrations because butane cylinders were in short supply and have risen in price astronomically. Needy Egyptians have to line up in front of a butane gas depot in the hope of refilling their empty cylinders for hours, or else they have to pay five times as much as the actual cost of such a cylinder.

The same butane cylinders have appeared on the Gaza side of the border.

The tunnels dug under the Egyptian border to move such products are in the hundreds. And the Palestinians don’t really care about how these aberrations affect Egypt itself.

Not surprisingly though, the same tunnels used to smuggle butane cylinders and stolen cars into Gaza are also used to smuggle weapons, ideologies, recreational drugs, militant raiders, or whatever into Egypt.

To smuggle stolen goods may seem trivial to some, but the death of Egyptian soldiers shouldn’t be so. In 2008, in two separate incidents, Palestinians killed several Egyptian officers and soldiers in border clashes. The interesting matter is that the Egyptians did not react to these events.

But in August 2011, when Israelis killed Egyptian soldiers while pursuing militants across the Israeli–Egyptian border, Egyptians stormed the Israeli Embassy. Egyptians remain silent when the Palestinians cause harm but become outraged when Israelis inflict similar harm.

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The juxtaposition between the two reactions is an interesting phenomenon. It portrays an entrenched sociopolitical ideology. It tells us that it may be hard to overcome one’s antagonism towards one group; by the same token it is hard to see the errors of one’s friend. Though mortified, Egyptians are passive towards such actions.

Egyptians regard Israel as the region’s bully and believe in the Palestinians’ right to their own state and to a dignified life. Also, of course, Egyptians recollect the many Egyptian-Israeli wars. Furthermore, Israel has indeed succeeded in aggravating Egyptians by holding the people of Gaza prisoners on their land.

So if it were the Israelis who stole the Egyptian cars or killed the Egyptian soldiers, demonstrations would have filled the streets, and maybe some would have opted to attack the Israeli Embassy. Now that it is the Palestinians, it passes unnoticed.

Indeed, it is during hard times that friends show their true colours. Foe and, more importantly, friend must respect countries’ borders and sovereignty.

Cancelling the Abou Hassira Moulid was an appropriate action for the pilgrims’ safety, but if these pilgrims are here to pay their respects, next year, they should be treated with civility and hospitality while enjoying their visit to the Abou Hassira shrine. A visitor who does no harm should be received with open arms. By the same token, a friend who uses your generosity to harm you is not your friend.

Interesting, this history of love and hatred.
Manal Al Sharif tells us about life for Saudi women. She explains that Saudi women always wear black—a cover worn over their regular clothes—and that they remain minors until they die. She also clarifies that while decision-making bodies exclude women, a woman can’t do anything without a male giving her permission.

Manal is known for her “It’s my right to drive” or “#Women2Drive” campaign. On June 17, 2011, she was jailed for nine days for driving her car on Saudi streets and then publishing her adventure on YouTube, creating cyber uproar.

Manal swayed the pendulum towards a new order. Although driving for women is not banned legally in Saudi, she explains that the social norm does not accept it. Manal’s quest broke the taboo; she became the people’s voice; and now women in Saudi Arabia, and men too, are inspired to ask for their basic normal rights.

Optimistically, she says that indeed things have started to change in Saudi: more women travel for educational purposes now, and women will not only vote but also run for parliament seats. Women are becoming very active on social media, too. Last year alone, Internet usage has increased 440 percent in Saudi Arabia.
I heard Manal Al Sharif speak at the Change Your World Cairo 2012 Conference that took place on January 18. Manal was one of four exceptional women who took part in the first panel, titled “Revolutionary Women.” They spoke about Arab women’s plight and the changes occurring today. Together they represent a picture of today’s Arab women that is very different from the stereotyped image.

Manal Al Sharif, from Saudi; Maria Al-Masani, from Yemen; Danya Bahir Hobba, from Libya; and Dalia Zeyada, from Egypt, presented a collaborative though unconsciously united effort to tackle and hopefully overcome Arab women’s struggles.

Maria Al-Masani, a Yemeni Canadian and an avid supporter of women around the world, in particular Yemen, her homeland, spoke of how life has changed for Yemeni women this last year. Women had felt they had no role, she said. They married at a very early age, and on average had 6.7 children. A poignant point she mentioned was that Yemenis assumed honour came from men and not women, but surprisingly it was a Yemeni woman who achieved the Nobel Prize.

With the shift in Yemen, women are beginning to play a more vital role: writing the constitution, asking for a quota of 34 members in parliament. Maria says that, prior to this shift, one single woman represented half the country in a parliament of 300, and yet her proposals and hard work always went to waste. But women are more hopeful now; they would like to repeat the era of Queen Sheba, when a woman ruled Yemen.

Dalia Zeyada, presented at the conference as one of the bravest bloggers in the world, started blogging in 2006 while fighting FGM—female genital mutilation—in Egypt. She then used social media to reach out to the public and voice her opinion. She has been active for the last six years promoting women’s causes and supporting their efforts.

Dalia expressed her frustration at the few seats women gained to the Egyptian parliament—1 percent, to be exact. But she says that women should not let anyone marginalize them; they should continue to adamantly ask for their rights and play a fundamental role in changing Egypt.
Dalia hopes that the revolution will change the current bias against women. Currently she has no hope that Buthaina Kamel, the first woman candidate for the Egyptian presidency, will gain significant votes. And she also expressed her annoyance at the hard-core Islamists who opted to present women candidates on promotional materials by their husbands’ names instead of their own, while one substituted the picture of a flower for her own photo.

During the Libyan Revolution, Danya Bahsir Hobba, a young social activist, organized aid shipments for medical treatment and basic needs in Libya. She now works with the Libyan youth to prepare for the transition and the future of Libya. Danya explains how Libyan women today are starting organizations to remove landmines and to teach children how to avoid them, and to help write the constitution. She is hopeful and reaffirms that Libyans have the motivation and eagerness to change, though they still lack organizational skills.

The general picture that these women portray is of hope and inspiration. They exude a different kind of mentality and optimism. They, and others like them, will play a pivotal role in overcoming the hurdles and barriers their countries are facing.
On the eve of January 25
January 24, 2012

Optimistic? Overly so.

On the eve of the anniversary of January 25, Field Marshal Tantawi, head of SCAF, lifts the Emergency Law, which has remained in effect since 1967, with short intermittent respites; this law had Egyptians taking to the streets nationwide calling for its end. Call me naïve, but I believe it is an excellent decision with perfect timing, since it may alleviate the expected tension on January 25. I reckon it is with good intentions: that Egyptians may say yet another demand has been met.

The eve of January 25 coincides with the first regular parliamentary session. On January 24, the parliament met and was in sync in its demands with the revolution. It came across as a strong and willful parliament, and the messiness and befuddlement that occurred during the inauguration session seem to have been replaced by order and discipline.

And in preparation for January 25, maps of where processions will start and where they will head are circulated on social media. These directions clearly identify for demonstrators and celebrators where to go in each district of Cairo, and which areas to avoid—where pro-Mubarak demonstrators may congregate.
So, for example, those coming from Maadi, Manial, and Old Cairo, starting off between 10 and 11 a.m. depending on their distances from the meeting spot, will be at Sayeda Zeinab Square at 2 p.m., and will end in Tahrir by 4 p.m. It is organized and carefully planned. The aim is to have everyone congregate in Tahrir by 4 p.m.

January 25 has also been proclaimed an official statutory holiday—maybe in fear of tension that may occur but also with the clear intention of making it a celebration.

As for ordinary Egyptians, they are fluctuating in their feelings between being celebratory, anticipatory, and worried. It can go either way, they say. January 25 should be a celebration and not a catastrophe, many hope.

Though many of the revolutionists believe that their demands have not been met, extraordinary achievements have been fulfilled. First, Mubarak’s regime has been ousted, and he and his followers are being tried. Think about it: no lynching, brutal death, or shameful treatment, and yet no escape and no “forgive and forget”; the man is being tried, an act akin to what happens in civilized countries. An accomplishment? Absolutely.

Second, a reliable parliamentary election took place, and a democratic parliament has convened. The parliament of today will not work for the new leader but will be the vigilant hand of the system. Third, Egyptians are expecting an unsoiled presidential election and a man with integrity to fill the presidential post by June.

But the most valuable change lies in the transparency that all Egyptians expect today. I don’t believe that any official in today’s Egypt can coerce, fudge, or blatantly steal with the ease that existed before. All this is evidence that the revolution has succeeded.

To belittle these achievements is erroneous; it’s more appropriate to celebrate. But at the same time Egyptians need to remain alert and observant. A strong will is needed as a foundation of what more can be achieved.

According to most Egyptians, this is not the day to be weary and exhausted of the deteriorating economy and the instability on the street. This is a day to rejoice.
Edging towards democracy

What will then happen today? The Minister of Interior has announced that the police force will not be partaking in any action in the squares in general. What the forces will do is secure establishments and public buildings. He has also asked Egyptians to celebrate versus destroy. And since, so far, Egyptians have not ganged up on the man as they have against all other previous interior ministers, hopefully they will heed his suggestions.

Again, what will happen today? I have hope that January 25, 2012 will be a unifying, invigorating, and celebratory day that all Egyptians will remember with pride and joy. I hope to see streets lit with joy and filled with happiness—I hope that years from now Egyptians will reminisce about the day they all bonded for the love of Egypt.

This is the option I’m vouching for. I really hope that my perfect picture is not stained or deformed.
Please hand over power so we can hold you accountable!

January 30, 2012

In a show of solidarity, a coalition of many activists’ factions join forces and send SCAF (Supreme Council of Armed Forces) a strong message, yet again, demanding it cede power to a committee chosen by the newly elected parliament. In a decree of several components, one item in particular caught my attention and should be flagged—“No secure or safe departure for SCAF.” The demands on twitter did not stop there, but they went as far as asking for the prosecution of the 19 murderers on SCAF.

For the last few days, and in commemoration of the revolution, millions went to the streets yet again. Some celebrated, others were somber remembering those who died, but many were there to say that the revolution is still continuing. These protestors asked that the armed forces return to its barracks leaving a civilian entity to reign. They want change today, not tomorrow, and not in five months as SCAF wants.

An impasse seems to be imminent.

The activists are frustrated, and they have every right to be so. The unwise and erroneous decisions, the deaths and humiliation, and the inability to govern are all good reasons for the activists’ aggravation.
against SCAF. In addition, Egyptians worry about SCAF’s hidden agenda and the truthfulness of its statements about its intention to relinquish power. And activists have become suspicious, reading into every action an evil-spirited SCAF.

Surprisingly, the more protestors push, the more SCAF gives in to their demands. Yesterday, it announced that the armed forces’ budget will be reviewed by parliament—a request I had thought would never be met. The army has always been a separate empire—no one dared to question its budget or its doings.

SCAF has dealt Egyptians quite a few hard blows, inciting them into furious and ongoing revolt, but if Egyptians think that SCAF will hand over power peacefully and await being convicted and held accountable, then they really are naïve and simplistic.

SCAF has been forewarned: it will have no safe departure; quite the contrary, the intention is to prosecute and try in court each member on that council. Why then would SCAF hand over power without a fight? Unless it is guaranteed a safe exit, it will hold on to power. The more the protestors demand and the higher the bar goes, the less likely SCAF will go peacefully.

Syria is a case in point. Had Asaad left before blood was spewed everywhere, he would have had a slight chance of fleeing the country safely. Now, the bloodbath has decided matters. Asaad will not leave peacefully, and Syria will continue its fight against its tyrant, losing more and more Syrians everyday and cornering Asaad even further into continuing his assault on his own people.

Had Mubarak known that he was going to be tried, he wouldn’t have departed that easily; he might have retaliated even more furiously. He might have stayed the course exactly as Asaad has. Only luck had Mubarak believe Egyptians meek enough not to persevere and pursue his downfall till the very far end.

Back to SCAF—the more cornered it is, the more determined it will become. The more it realizes that the people are after its members, the more it will make it more difficult for Egyptians to gain sovereignty peacefully.
So where are we going with all this? One scenario is pretty ominous: Egypt will turn into another Syria—the two sides never reaching agreement, with Egyptians unwavering to avenge the fallen, and SCAF adamant to leave power unscathed.

The better option would be to hold our collective breath for the next few months and wait things out, giving the peaceful transfer a chance and seeing whether SCAF will indeed hand over power to a civilian president.

Even then SCAF may have to be guaranteed protection of some sort or else it will refuse to leave. Ongoing protests may be making it harder for SCAF to depart and forcing it further towards a point of no return.

Revolutionaries are not diplomats, but they may have to resort to diplomacy if they want to get out of this mess peacefully. Oh, they will get out of it most definitely; it is the peaceful part that is questionable.

SCAF needs room to maneuver out of this.
Lamees Dhaif, Bahraini journalist and author, lost four jobs and was banned from writing, but remained engaged in the cause she endorsed; she explains how she benefited from social media. Lamees has 60,000 followers on Twitter; almost 20,000, on Facebook; and 43,000, on her website. The largest newspaper in Bahrain prints 12,000 copies a day; “Who needs standard media?” she asks with pride.

Shatha Al-Harazi, a Yemeni blogger, refers to social media as “. . . heaven; it makes me competitive and protects me from harassment.” She can advocate her cause from her laptop while in the comfort of her own living room—hassle free. And Dalia Zeyada, a blogger from Egypt, believes that social media is a space where one can express his/her mind without fear or limitations. She advocates Twitter and Facebook insisting that both played major roles in bringing the views of revolutionists to the forefront.

Lamees and the others are examples of how Arabs in general, and Arab women in particular, have cleverly utilized social media in promoting their causes. These particular activists were speaking at Change
Your World Cairo 2012. During the discussions that ensued, they all expressed their gratitude to social media.

These citizen journalists exemplify the role social media plays—during crucial times—in disseminating and getting information to other Arabs. They portray a path of engagement in today’s Arab World.

The Arab World is still juvenile in modernity and democracy: it has remained subdued under dictators for decades as it watched the modern world go by. Through social media, it is beginning to catch up in leaps and bounds, especially where freedom of speech is concerned.

Scott Martelle, in the LA Times’ review of Wael Ghoneim’s memoirs explains how Wael, a Egyptian hero created on Facebook, anonymously launched the page “We Are All Khaled Saeed.” It was in response to the beating death of Khaled Saeed, a fellow Egyptian, at the hands of two Egyptian State Security officers. Ghoneim’s first posting was filled with sorrow and disdain: “Today they killed Khaled. If I don’t act for his sake, tomorrow they will kill me.” 

According to the review, within minutes, the page had 300 members, and it continued to grow at a rapid pace, eventually reaching 350,000. It soon became an online venue for all concerned to air their frustration with Mubarak’s dominating reign.

Ghoneim credits social media for its ability to connect Egyptian activists, for one offspring of social media was the resounding movement that became January 25th and led to the toppling of Mubarak. Of course, once the momentum grew beyond Facebook, it became a different entity. It became a revolution.

And the barriers, in general, have been lowered; money, means, and authority stopped being the sole players. Anyone can now exert influence, be it an ordinary woman tweeting from her home, or a young activist inciting followers from afar. Social media has given the ordinary Arab a voice—an extraordinarily marvelous voice, which can reach ordinary Arabs everywhere.

This newly acquired freedom has given Arabs freewill even if they are besieged. Syrian tweeters inform the world of events in Syria with immediacy and on an ongoing basis.

All the above is positive. Still, accountability is key. Social media are a public domain akin to regular media, and citizen journalists could be held accountable in a similar fashion to their regular media counterparts.

Cursing, blasphemy and mere hearsay are libelous in social media in the same way as they are libelous in any newspaper. Citizen journalists are often unaware of this because in social media, a lot of slippage takes place between writing to friends and writing for the wide world. But these citizen journalists should know that in Egypt many tweeters have been held accountable by authorities for inciting others to violence, slandering authorities, and tweeting hearsay or unauthenticated information.

Social media users are usually aware of their right to speak freely, but may be less aware of the rights of the public. Ramifications exist. Citizen journalists should ask themselves if their stories not only add up, but if they could stand up in court. What is the evidence for any statement, claim or complaint, and is the source of that evidence reliable?

Pseudonyms and anonymity are superficial. Everywhere, someone knows and can be compelled to tell, the real name behind a pseudonym. Everyone is accountable—always.

Most importantly, Arab social media incur responsibility, an awareness of effect and of influence. This can go either way. As much as social media have been a beacon to the happenings in the Arab world, social media can also have an unfortunately manipulative hand in forging destruction and mayhem.

On social media, news spreads like wildfire. Someone tweets that SCAF is responsible for the killings in Port Said, and activists and football fans attack the Ministry of Interior. Another tweeter calls on people to boycott an event—no one shows up. Someone else retweets a dubious thought about “poisonous” tear gas, and he or she might be fanning flames that could lead to many deaths. No question: social media is effective.
Let’s hope that Egyptians and Arabs continue to enjoy this new source of freedom, and the extraordinary—even revolutionary!—benefits it can bring to the information exchange, without jeopardizing their own, or anyone else’s safety, security and wellbeing.
On February 1, 2012, another calamity befalls Egypt: the Port Said massacre. Over 70 football fans were brutally killed and hundreds were injured when Al-Masry fans attacked the Ahly team players and fans at Port Said Stadium. Super football matches were cancelled until a verdict in the case against the murderers is announced.

A scarved, pious Muslim woman comments profoundly, “Nothing will satisfy the protestors. Even if Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, came down to them from heaven and did things his perfect way, they won’t be satisfied. Nothing will appease them.”

In Egyptian/Muslim terms, this is almost blasphemy. No one can place Prophet Mohammed on par with regular and ordinary human beings. However, this is an explicit manifestation of the level of frustration this woman feels. Many Egyptians share her sentiments. Though she falls into the category of “couch sitters,” those who did not participate in any protests and remained distant throughout the revolution, she actually has to travel all around downtown Cairo to get to her nearby place of work because of the walls that have been built to keep protestors and armed forces apart.
Aam Imam, an elderly vendor I’ve come to know well, is in tears. Aam Imam’s sole means of earning a living entails piling some trifling goods—candy, chips, or fruits—on any curb in the middle of any spot he can find. It seems that his usual buyers have opted not to buy anything anymore. He is furious at the on goings and wails his insults at the revolution and the activists.

By the same token but in total contrast, Egyptian protestors are totally dissatisfied with the state of affairs in Egypt: the atrocities, the transparency void, and the disarray.

These two groups are far apart in their expectations and courses. The difference between them—and between the many factions in the middle—is an explicit depiction of the state of affairs in Egypt today.

After the Port Said massacre, Egyptians walked in a daze. They could hardly believe what had happened. Egypt was never a bloodthirsty country; its revolution had been a peaceful one. Its football fans, though avid loyalists, never resorted to deliberate and malicious violence—at most, insults and fist fights.

Why would anyone go to watch a football match prepared, with the necessary weapons, to kill? How come young men had their necks wrung, while others were trampled upon during the stampede out of the stadium because the doors were sealed shut? How come, they ask?

Though Egyptians still went about their business, I could sense the anguish in their tears, shed and unshed. A halo of misery engulfed them. And the queries and questions are still unanswered a week after. Why? By whom? And to whose benefit? As long as these questions remain unanswered, blame is quick to form and mushroom into a frenzy of hatred—and, of course, hearsay thrives in such an ambience.

Consequently, protestors are back on the streets yet again. Riots around the Ministry of Interior have caused hundreds of injuries and some fatalities. And the masses respond by fluctuating amongst many extremes. One extreme is calling for a retaliatory general strike, or what some call civil disobedience, on February 11, 2012, in commemoration of Hosni Mubarak’s ousting. This would easily bring Egypt to a standstill. The other extreme is urging the armed forces to be firmer with
the protestors, to detain them swiftly to end the riots—an action that could have happened in Mubarak’s days but definitely not today.

Then there are the conspiracy theorists. “Those in Torra prison—Gamal and Alaa Mubarak, the ex-Minister of Interior, and several of his assistants—are behind this disaster,” says one faction. So SCAF, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, relocates the prisoners to various prisons just in case the detainees are plotting ominously. The other group is absolutely sure that SCAF is the instigator. To them, SCAF remains loyal to Mubarak and continues to jeopardize Egypt’s future by causing catastrophes that seem to occur every now and then, an improbable scenario.

But even more sides to this dilemma exist. There are those who think Egyptians have gone astray—that, with the revolution, Egyptians have come to mistake anarchy for freedom. Their rights, their way, and their ideology must be fulfilled; if this means that others are shunned and marginalized, it is a non-issue. Others believe that hooliganism has emerged like an erupting volcano, spewing angry fumes all over the peaceful land of Egypt.

These are all fine hypotheses, for everyone has a right to his/her own opinion in today’s Egypt. But these views have escalated to an extremely volatile level. Egyptians have turned against one another at the grassroots level—amongst family members, neighbours, and friends—and the institutional level—amongst the government, SCAF, the National Assembly, religious affiliations, political parties, and of course revolutionists. These colliding forces have affected Egypt as a whole. All extremes exist. Top all this with a media that has found its voice, and you get a concoction that spells danger.

Still, an online poll was conducted yesterday asking Egyptians: “Will you participate in the civil disobedience discourse taking place on February 11?” Interestingly enough, those who affirmed their participation were under 20 percent. I don’t know how many will close shop, stay home, refuse to drive buses, or fly planes on Saturday, February 11; it is all up in the air.
The Islamists are here (Part II)
February 15, 2012

Two weeks into the life of the newly elected Islamic-majority Egyptian parliament, member Mamdouh Ismail of the Salafi Party, a radical Islamist group, stands up from his seat, goes to the microphone, and recites the call for prayers.

Let’s put matters into perspective. In Egypt, people don’t generally call for prayers in a public space. And never has anyone done so in parliament let alone a parliament in session—in so doing Ismail was setting a precedent, testing the waters on how far his party can go, exhibiting how dangerously crafty this party is, and, of course, undermining the parliament itself, its guiding rules, and its speaker.

Once the determined member began his call, a discussion ensued between him and the speaker, El Katatni. The speaker asked the member to sit down twice; each time he exclaimed, “I did not give you permission to speak,” but Ismail went on regardless. It was then that the speaker justifiably decided to shush the member. He told him off saying, “There is a mosque outside where you can pray; parliament is a place for discussion not praying.” When Ismail continued even further, El Katatni became aggravated; “You are no more devout than any of us; besides, work is yet another kind of worship,” to which the other
Edging towards democracy

members applauded. I found this dialogue historic and momentous from both perspectives—the plucky move on the member’s part and the even gutsier response from the speaker.

Ismail is the same parliamentarian who improvised the parliamentary oath during the inaugural session. The oath ends with a pledge to respect the constitution and law, and Ismail added “and God’s law”—a change that signifies a shift from respect for the secular to a focus on a singular religion (Islam); that defies the speaker; and that belittles the oath itself.

During elections, this party of extremists won over 20% of the parliament seats, and since then it has been flagrantly promoting its views, leaving Egyptians daunted and perplexed as far as what the future holds.

And these extreme Islamists continue to baffle. They emerged in full force, making a statement about their devotion through their physical appearance: the men fanning their unkempt beards and hiking their short galabiyas, and the women cladding themselves in black from head to toe. They had kept a low profile for years; now that they have equal rights, they do not hesitate to draw attention to themselves.

The Salafis, now that they are here to stay, are putting everyone to the test to see how much Egyptians will allow. And stories are in abundance. At a social club, a woman was admonished by a religious Islamist for wearing a modest “décolleté,” an action never heard of before. One university student explains that a midyear event was cancelled since the radical Islamists wouldn’t accept entertainment. A story is circulating in the newspapers that the Egyptian national anthem, sung at schools, has in certain religious districts, been replaced by a religious one. And many other telling stories warn Egyptians to heed.

Of course, the media has gone berserk, too. Tongue in cheek, media focused on what the Salafis denounce and what they permit. Feigning puzzlement and curiosity, talk show hosts began asking radicalists to clarify the right from the wrong. This opened a huge can of worms with the Salafis falling into the trap ever so naively. They came across as petty and ignorant, and instead of focusing on how to get the country through these trying times, they found themselves focusing on
trivialities: wearing bikinis, singing and enjoying the arts, and participating in sports.

All Egyptians should enjoy equal rights including the extremists especially since they have a following to be reckoned with, but it works both ways. Now, other Egyptians, in particular liberals and Copts, deserve the same rights, too. The ways of past regimes where other voices were quieted will not work. Egyptians can’t fall into the same trap yet again.

Will the extremists succeed? And where does this leave Egypt? En route to the past? Or better yet back to the future? Will Egypt move forward and become a developed country open in its views to other developed countries, or will it close on itself to satisfy those who believe in the ways of yester years?

This will be an uphill battle. It is here that activists and revolutionists should continue their struggle. As much as there were political tyrants, there are religious ones. Freedom is freedom be it freedom of speech, basic rights, or religion.

Egypt will soon realize that it cannot replace one tyrant with another.
In search of a president

In Egypt, no news is very good news

March 2, 2012

After a blood-spattered December and a more deadly January, an unexciting February led Egypt into a March respite. Though Egyptians are basking in this short but peaceful phase, they are awaiting the next few months in anticipation of June when many pivotal historic events will take place.

December and January were packed with clashes and standoffs, causing hundreds of fatalities. Then came February; after the deadly Port Said massacre on February 1st, things quieted down. Simultaneously, Egyptians saw the inauguration of the parliament, and all that came with it; the NGO kerfuffle with the US; and the ongoing tug-of-war between the extreme Islamists and the rest of Egypt.

But Egypt has enjoyed a month of solid peace. Someone said, “Four weeks of no news translates to very good news.” I agree. Things have been calm and uneventful, and uneventful is good these days. But again this is the calm before the next storm. Many anticipated events will take place soon; each will undoubtedly create its own surprises.
First, Mubarak’s trial ended, the verdict to be announced in June. Whatever the verdict may be, some group will readily criticize it, belittling the judicial system and its “unjust bias.” The pro-Mubaraks will denounce the harsh verdict, and the anti-Mubaraks will condemn the lenient one. Satisfying everyone is not an option.

Will Egyptians then take to the streets yet again? Or will they close this page of their lives and move on? This remains to be seen.

In the meantime, the newly elected parliament is enjoying its moment in the limelight. Many Egyptians sat hours on end watching the inaugural session on January 23; the interest in the parliamentary activities has subsided somewhat, but it remains a constant source of attention, chatter, and ridicule. From the MP who recited the mid-session call for prayers to the one who considered teaching the English language to be a foreign conspiracy, the parliament continues to baffle everyone.

Still, Egyptians are watching parliament closely and hoping that it will indeed play the prominent role they expect—especially since the parliament will also participate in the writing of the constitution, the next noteworthy event in the lives of Egyptians.

Soon the 100-member committee entrusted with the task of writing the constitution will be established, from members of the parliament and the society in general. And since many parliament members are religiously inclined, Egyptians are worried that their input may sway Egypt into becoming more rigidly Islamic than it already is.

Lastly, the presidential elections schedule has been announced. By the end of June an Egyptian president will be elected. It has not been decided which will come first, the constitution or the election, but obviously both are vital to Egypt’s future.

The process, the election itself, the predictions, the results, and everything in between will resurrect anxiety and worry. Egyptians have stopped taking anything lightly, and the presidential race is no laughing matter—they will find fault, ask for transparency, deem actions unsuitable, and protest if necessary.

How many presidential hopefuls are there? At this point, the number is uncountable; everyone has suddenly realized that the post is up for
grabs, and presidential candidates are coming from everywhere. From TV hosts, ex-ministers and officials, and retired army officers to fundamentalists, businessmen, and activists, everyone is eyeing the job; young and old are interested; even a woman, who has absolutely no chance of winning, has decided to run for the presidency.

Every one of these hopefuls believes that he—or she—has the ability to improve the status quo and the conditions that Egypt has suffered from for decades. It will take severe haggling to discard the unfit and shortlist the candidates to an appropriate list.

But this president, to be elected in less than 100 days, will face one of the thorniest jobs in the history of modern Egypt: the job of making a difference. Egyptians have lost their acceptance of mediocre performances, and they want considerable change and progress immediately.

If that president can’t deliver improvements instantly, he will be met with a disgruntled following. The president will have to act speedily and proficiently to satisfy some, only some, of the Egyptians, the only hope being that this satisfaction will rub off on others because this is the most common way Egyptians get their news—through hearsay and word of mouth.

The next few months are key to Egypt’s future. And June, in particular, has too many events to pass unnoticed—it will be a memorable month in Egypt’s history.
In almost two months, again Egyptians will practice their voting rights while choosing their next president. In stark contrast to elections in years gone by, Egyptians have been taking civil rights quite seriously, whether in the constitutional referendum or the parliament elections. They stood in long, winding queues for hours and emerged from each riding to proudly show off their dipped-in-red-dye forefingers.

And the buzz at this point is quite loud. “Whom will you vote for?” is the question of the day. It is a simple question, but one that, today in Egypt, exemplifies confusion and bewilderment nonetheless.

“I’m voting for Buthaina Kamel,” says one female friend. “I know she hasn’t a chance in hell, but I will be making a statement, that indeed a woman can go far in Egypt.”

“I’m voting for Dr. Abou El Fetouh,” says another. “He seems to be the only candidate with a head on his shoulders—diplomatic, moderate, and powerful in a quiet way.”

The reasons are endless, and the candidates are endless too. Egyptians are not only practicing their electoral rights, they are also enjoying a newfound right: to become the next Egyptian president. All in all
almost 500 candidates have registered already. And every day we see a few more hopefuls declare their intentions.

There are those who were there from the day Mubarak stepped down: Amr Moussa, the ex-foreign minister and head of the Arab League; Hamdeen Sabahi, who, as a young university student, stood up to Anwar Sadat and got him all worked up; Ahmed Shafik, the six-week prime minister after Mubarak was ousted; Aymen Nour, who had ended up in prison because he did just that—run in Mubarak’s era. And so many others that one can easily lose track.

Then there are the newcomers: Mansour Hassan in particular is an interesting new face. He is being named the “consensus” president as some say he is being backed by the Muslim Brotherhood and the army. When I heard him speak in January, he was sympathetic towards SCAF and its actions, proving his allegiance.

In addition to the politically inclined, candidates are applying for the presidential position simply because they can. The three Copts, who registered lately, know that they have no chance, but they want to exhibit the Coptic presence in the Egyptian political arena. Then from the plumber to the lawyer, from the photographer to the lumberman, in addition to the odd fellow who is running as King Farouk’s son, all these candidates are merely enjoying their moment in the limelight.

But the most bizarre candidate is radical Islamist, Sheikh Hazem Abou Ismail. Ismail said that, if elected, he would implement Islamic sharia law and cancel the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. He epitomizes what liberal Egyptians fear. To me, Hazem Abou Ismail personifies backwardness and ignorance.

Though the El Nour Party, the radical Islamic party, hasn’t announced whom it will support, its intent is obvious: to support the candidate with the most Islamic program. And polls show that Ismail has indeed an acute Islamic vision and some following.

And Egyptians are beleaguered and overwhelmed. Whom to choose from amongst this kaleidoscope of hopefuls? Not one single runner emits the encouraging vibes or exudes leadership. But hopefully the

24 Nour’s name was added to this post after he put his name forward on March 26, 2012.
next few months will clarify platforms, intent, and abilities of those running, and then Egyptians can make up their minds. In the meantime, Egyptians remain perplexed.

A vicious battle it is going to be. The fear is that with that many runners, votes will be spread thin amongst liberals and moderate Islamists paving the way for Ismail who has the devout Islamists’ support. Though time will weed out the mediocre, even a handful may prove to be detrimental in splitting the votes.

Egyptians don’t expect a silver bullet or a perfect president. They have matured and accepted the reality—no president will perform miracles. But a president who can unite Egyptians and make an effort to build back the country from the ground up is their hope.

Time will tell if the exercise of electoral rights will work for Egyptians.

Mansour Hassan, the presidential candidate mentioned here, died on December 22, 2012.
A changed Egypt: the bitter reality
March 20, 2012

A few years back, while walking on a street in Heliopolis, a Canadian friend visiting Egypt stopped in her tracks, unable to grasp the scene she was witnessing. She was staring at two three-year-olds playing on their tricycles unsupervised and unattended. You see it was 10 p.m. I knew what she was thinking, so I quickly responded, “It’s OK; they are safe to play on the street alone at 10 p.m.—nothing will happen to them.”

That was then; today, the American Embassy in Cairo issued an alert email to expats living in Cairo warning them against carjackings. It explained that carjacking attacks could happen anytime. It went on to reassure Americans that car thieves don’t target Americans per se, but aim at ransoming the cars back to its owners. The email goes on to explain the appropriate reaction if someone is in such a dire situation. Obviously, people’s safety is what is at stake here.

The stark difference between the two events exhibits the changes that have taken place in today’s Egypt—an Egypt less safe, more violent.
Kidnappings, assaults, and vandalism are on the rise, so people are resorting to precautionary measures. Egyptians will tell you that life as they knew it has changed drastically: don’t carry too much cash on you, and don’t exhibit wealth or flaunt jewelry. Shut the door while the deliveryman awaits being paid. Never leave your kids unattended at home or elsewhere. Roll car windows up and lock car doors. Add security systems to apartment buildings, and if need be, have a weapon, non-lethal or otherwise, handy and close by. All these reactions were unheard of and unnecessary before.

Violence has indeed become more prominent in Egypt today. The Port Said massacre is living proof. Even if “hidden hands” manipulated the event and security was nonexistent, there were those who were willing to wring people’s necks without any feeling of remorse. Unusual? Absolutely, and totally unEgyptian.

Others resort to violence to get what they want. Ministers are held hostage, workers barge into offices, and students attack professors on campus grounds. Every culprit has a reason for his action, and he believes profoundly in his right to act.

How about the protectors of this country? Army and police forces use tear gas against protestors until they choke to death; they target demonstrators’ eyes, beat women with batons and drag them unconscious, and throw bodies amongst the garbage.

Even in moments of mourning and grief, Egyptians die because they try to get to the cathedral where the deceased Pope Shenoudah rests, and they get trampled on.

Egyptians have suddenly adopted violence as a way of life. It was never in their nature, so it seems a newly acquired characteristic. But how could that be the emerging way after a revolution so successful, so pure, that people around the world are still talking about it?

Egyptians had never been a violent people; true, they are loud and easily angered, and may readily get into fights over insignificant matters, but to be ready to take the law in one’s hands and accept violence as a means of handling affairs on a daily basis is a remarkably new trait that should be recognized for what it is: a grave danger.
The reasons behind the change are clear. Amongst a people that had never enjoyed freedom or democracy, it is quite easy to misinterpret such assets and consider them personal rights—I can do what I please. It’s a free country. Of course, the fact that many Egyptians are illiterate and unaware of what freedom is does not help either.

In addition, protestors achieved many goals by protesting; when the authorities didn’t comply, they exerted more pressure. And so the simple folks have come to believe that protesting and exerting pressure is the way to go.

Vigilance keeps the powerful from going astray, which is admirable, but there are those who mimic these actions to get whatever they want—willfully right or wrong, it doesn’t matter. And this is the true dilemma.

At this point, people cannot decipher between rightful protestors and those who are taking the law into their hands. The picture has become blurry, and the fine line between the right and the wrong has disappeared.

In the meantime, Egyptians have lost confidence. They foresee a grim future, exude indifference, and suspect ill in all. It’s a heartbreaking outcome to a peaceful revolution.
Egyptians will finally get to exercise their voting rights in a presidential election. After 60 years of dubious elections, an honest and reliable one will truly be a milestone. Some Egyptians had avoided voting for years; from Nasser’s 99.9 percent vote to Mubarak’s totally rigged 2006 elections, almost all elections had been fraudulent. The 2012 election promises to be an improvement from that perspective, but will it be truly democratic? But more importantly is a democratic vote the way to go?

Omar Suleiman, the ill-fated vice-president who came to power during Mubarak’s last few weeks before stepping down, claimed that Egyptians “are not ready for democracy yet.” This angered Egyptians who had just toppled their tyrant and believed the world was theirs. Even if true, Suleiman should have kept his thoughts to himself since this quote will haunt him forever. However, his infamous words may not be totally wrong.

To understand why democracy may be too large a challenge for some Egyptians, it’s useful to recall the work of Abraham Maslow, an American sociologist whose theory of needs hierarchy posits political action as relating to the need for self-actualization. But self-actualization
may not be attainable, for it is near the top of a list of social and psychological needs that starts with the basics: shelter, food, love and safety.

In a country whose population is 40% under the poverty line and where millions remain deprived and unsheltered, democratic aspirations may not be reachable since the basic needs of these Egyptians have not been met. They are unable to fathom candidate platforms, choice ramifications, but more importantly, whom to vote for.

Some will vote with their hearts, for Islamic contenders have supported the underprivileged for long, but others disappointingly will vote with their basic needs in mind.

The reality is that a ration of oil, sugar, or rice, or a KFC meal, is the preferred way to buy votes. Within a poverty-stricken society, staples can buy a candidate a following, and yet these voters will remain totally oblivious of their role in distorting democratic outcomes. This is a sobering truth.

Another reason why democracy will lose in this election is the downpour of financial aid flooding Egypt to promote certain candidates. Muslim countries are supporting Muslim candidates. Hazim Abou Ismail’s face is on thousands of posters, banners, billboards, and other kinds of advertisements because he is the candidate who can afford it. In the meantime, the simple folks, brainwashed, are getting accustomed to the face of their future president.

What remains is the democratic process itself. Vigilant Egyptians are sorting through the hopefuls, weighing one candidate against the other, and aiming to choose the best amongst the liberals. But even in this process, Egyptians are going to lose.

Here’s why. With almost 900 presidential candidates applying and hoping to attain the necessary 30,000 support letters from around Egypt, Egyptians are inundated with information and are confused. Logically hundreds of these will lose steam and end by withdrawing from the race. However, no matter how many are excluded, dozens will remain. And if liberals in the dozens run and compete against one another, votes will most definitely be spread thin. From this perspective, practicing democracy will ultimately not only lose but also backfire.
By exercising democracy, liberal Egyptians will lose to the strong following that candidates such as Abou Ismail have. Ismail’s following has one and only one candidate to vote for. So while liberals are claiming democratic success by choosing from a wide spectrum, the Salafis will win by choosing the one single candidate.

The bottom line is that democratic choices and civic rights in such an ambience are not attainable.

So what is the answer? The solution is twofold. First, liberals must continue to promote the candidates that they find most appropriate, and the examples are many. Then, when push comes to shove, they ultimately vote strategically—they vote for the candidate who can win. They must stand together to gain a majority.

Democratic ideas, and the practise of democracy as a notion will take time to be fully grasped and then realized in Egypt. It’ll take a few rounds till it finally arrives. During this period one’s hope that literacy and awareness will have gained momentum. In the meantime, the result of the current round may not be what Egyptians want. How they will react to a president not to their liking remains to be seen.

For the immediate future, the result of this battle will be of overwhelming consequences. But whatever the results are, I hope Egyptians will accept the democratic process and accept the new president even if he isn’t their choice. This is what a democracy, even if it is a misguided one, is all about.
Over 900 candidates submitted their official papers in the hopes of becoming Egypt’s next president. Yes, the basket of hopefuls was bountiful; many were genuinely ready to become Egypt’s next president; while some did it for the fun of it (Saad El Sogheir, singer), and others used the application process as a campaigning stunt (Abou Ismail), some were keen enough to be validated, but they didn’t receive the necessary support (Buthaina Kamel).

Still, at the end of the day, 23 candidates managed to collect then submit enough signatures to qualify for the job of leading Egypt. The de-selection process has begun, but in the next few weeks, it is quite likely that we will see many significant twists and turns.

Hazim Abou Ismail’s mother dual citizenship remains a thorn in his side. Today, though, the court has declared that his mother died an Egyptian and had no other citizenship. Khairat El Shater, the Ikhwan (Muslim Brotherhood) favourite, who has just been released from prison, hasn’t received full pardon yet, the same as Aymen Nour, the other ex-inmate. According to the constitution, timing is of the essence
here—a six-year period after the pardon is necessary, so both may not qualify. This is why, the just-in-case Muslim Brotherhood candidate, Mohammed Morsi, is waiting backstage to replace El Shater if the latter is disqualified.

But the religious hopefuls don’t stop there: Abou El Fetouh and El Awa are definitely in the race, but talk to many Egyptians now, and they will tell you that they have lost faith in the Ikhwan (Muslim Brotherhood). Initially, the MB was not to have a candidate run in the presidential election; however, a change of heart had the party nominate Shater for the presidency giving Egyptians a severe blow. Thus the tables have turned somewhat against the Islamists. Polls this week say that the support for Islamists is down from last week (57.6% to 42%).

On the other front, Mubarak’s “men” form a powerful cluster—Moussa, Shafik, and Suleiman. These hopefuls have worked alongside Mubarak at one point of their careers, and that is a stigma that brands these candidates as cronies and traitors.

But the eyes seem to be focused on Suleiman in particular. The anti-Suleiman campaign is strong, for he has a stained background and his image on Facebook and Twitter is blood-splattered.

More importantly, Suleiman now has to defend his candidacy formally in a legal suit that calls for barring him from running. And parliament is mulling over a bill that may forbid those who worked with the previous regime from running for the presidency.

Who is left? And what kind of following do the remaining candidates have? Not many, and not much.

The ramifications of a successful Islamic candidate are obvious. Abou Ismail is not an experienced politician, nor is El Shater. Both think that their religious background suffices. The prospect of Egypt’s fate if a radical Islamist is elected closely resembles the dark ages. If this occurs many Egyptians will take to the street again.

Then if a Mubarak figure wins, this, too, may lead to disastrous unrest. The hatred towards Suleiman is clear and definite. Millions of Egyptians deem him an oppressor who practiced rendition and torture.

Again, if Suleiman is elected, millions will end up on the street protesting again—a new revolution will be in the making.

The Islamists and the pro-Mubaraks are competing against one another; some may choose Suleiman to outbid the Islamists, and simultaneously, others will side with an Islamist to avoid Suleiman.

The optimistic scenario would be if Abou El Fetouh, a moderate Islamist, or Amr Moussa, a distant-from-Mubarak man wins. Maybe Egyptians will then come to accept one of them. But the bleak scenario would be if Abou Ismail or Suleiman wins. Then Egypt would be back to square one, paying dearly.

In due course, the tables may turn, the scales may tilt, and candidates may drop from the race and others may gain followings—the future is unpredictable and tense.

The history of modern Egypt, good or bad, is in the making.

Omar Suleiman dies in July 2012.
An open letter to Egypt’s forthcoming president

April 23, 2012

This wishful post was written prior to President Morsi’s presidential win.

DEAR MR. PRESIDENT:

Congratulations! Egyptians have elected you as their next leader. I, and all Egyptians, have high hopes that you will help Egypt return to the path of stability and progress.

I see you as a strong man, politically correct, soft spoken, with integrity, and with respect for Egypt and Egyptians. I see you as a wise thinker consulting with many advisors before making a decision. I see you as working ever so hard to bring the poverty-stricken up to the decent level they deserve. I see you as loving Egypt more than anything else. A vision? Yes, but who knows? You may prove me right after all.

After 18 months of precarious standoffs, twists and turns, erroneous decisions, and demolished hopes, you have arrived. And you have promised to stand on guard for Egypt.

I hope you will accept what I am about to say, not as words of wisdom, but as words from the heart. I am by no means a politician, but I, too, am an Egyptian who loves her country deeply, and would like
to see it prospering. Then again, don’t listen to only me. Listen to all Egyptians—some have very smart ideas.

Below are some rudimentary suggestions that could make your years in power productive and stable.

**Remain transparent**

Decisions made behind closed doors are the way of the past. Today, decisions and why they are made must be presented to the people prior to being confirmed and accepted. And to leave Egyptians fumbling for a reason, and coming up with their own rationale, which will mostly be the wrong one, will, disappointingly, make you look pretentious.

I suggest a press secretary similar to that of the White House. On a set day of the week, at the same time, every week, the official press secretary meets—in public—with journalists to answer their queries and questions.

This would lead to transparency and it would clear ambiguity between the leader and his people. Televised, this would actually become an even more watched program than all the talk shows that have emerged in the last little while.

The important matter is to give people answers so they don’t have to draw conclusions based on guesswork. Being proactive beats being reactive.

**Avoid Bias**

Egyptians chose you knowing your inclination be it liberal or Islamic. However, if you lean towards one group against the other, Egypt will be greatly disappointed in you. Now that you have been elected, you serve all Egyptians—all Egyptians.

Be fair and just to all members of the society. Help minorities and those marginalized. Balance between those who have and those who don’t have. Remember: you now serve all Egyptians not one party: not the Islamists, the liberals, the capitalists, and definitely not your followers. If a group of Egyptians realizes that it is being marginalized, you will lose your credibility.

**Be Firm**
One of the reasons that SCAF and all the appointed governments lost miserably is because they came up with decisions but soon afterwards revoked these decisions due to pressure or because they realized that their decisions were not all too sound after all.

I suggest studying change carefully before going ahead with it. However, once a change is made, and you are sure—having consulted with many advisors—that it is for the benefit of Egypt, don’t change your mind. The wishy washy ways of the last 18 months have left Egyptian with a sour taste. They know that unattainable goals will not be met; hence, they will become indifferent and apathetic.

Stand behind your words so that Egyptians take you seriously.

**Keep it simple and down to earth**

Egyptians have an ability to create tyrants. They often turn the ordinary man into a pharaoh because they glorify him. It is easy to fall victim to the ways of the past, not because you demand it but because your staff and Egyptians in general think that way.

The examples of how to remain humble and down to earth are many. Egyptians disliked road blocks when Mubarak was travelling on a certain route, hated the zooming in on Gamal and Alaa during a football match, were disgusted by the size of Mubarak’s photograph in government offices, those photographs that kept getting larger and larger until they were twice the size of Mubarak himself.

Egyptians disliked the phrases, “Mama Suzanne, and Egyptian First Lady,” and the many titles bestowed on Mubarak himself.

I don’t believe that the Mubaraks chose these titles themselves, but they didn’t mind them nonetheless. Become aware of what your associates suggest and what the media will comply with and lead Egyptians to accept.

Though many Egyptians looked upon Mubarak as a father figure, many others disliked the connotation. Avoid nuances and be yourself. You are no one’s father; you are the leader, serving all Egyptians.

In other words, remain an ordinary Egyptian.

**Assist the “first lady” in becoming a model for Egyptian women**
In the six previous decades, Egypt had three presidents’ wives. Nasser’s wife, Tahia, had no role whatsoever, but when Jehan El Sadat came along, Egyptians were flabbergasted by her opinionated self and western look. Suzanne started meekly but then changed. Though Suzanne did much, all her efforts are overlooked because of the dominating presence she seemed to emit.

This one is a tough one. It is not easy to satisfy Egyptians. They neither want a docile and complacent president’s wife, nor do they want an opinionated, self-centered interfering person. Balance is of the essence here.

Get the first lady to listen to the people and not her associates. Her backers will tell her what she wants to hear, but if she reads and watches the media closely, she will get a better picture of her status in the eyes of Egyptians.

Remain in contact with Egyptians—avoid the ivory tower

If you withdraw to an ivory tower in Sharm El Sheikh, as your predecessor did in his later years of governing, you will be unaware of what Egyptians are going through. Keep in contact with them—talk to them, associate with them, and come down from the pedestal. Your advisors may misguide you, so beware.

Today, Egyptians flare up because they are not listened to. The only way they can get their demands is by blocking a road or dismantling a blockage. They resort to force to be listened to.

Avoid reaching that state. Listen carefully; however, I am not saying you should relent and give in to unusual demands. Listen, see what is right, and then decide without reneging on your previous decisions, which you know were right for Egypt as a whole.

The road to prosperity is steep; it is indeed an uphill battle. I wish you the best, so you can give Egypt what Egyptians want.

Yours truly,
Azza Radwan Sedky
An Egyptian
My wish list has fallen on deaf ears. The only suggestion that materialized was the press secretary though he speaks when necessary and not at a set time. Otherwise, President Morsi has managed to fulfill every concern mentioned here: no transparency; total allegiance towards one’s clan, the Muslim Brotherhood; hasty decisions that get revoked; costly presidential motorcades that block traffic; a First Lady who has no role; and a people lost and anguished.
Are Islamists stupid?
April 27, 2012

Adel Imam, an Egyptian comedian with over a 40-year-span in the business of laughter, was tried in two separate accounts on blasphemy—insulting and abusing Islam in films and plays that have been shown and played for decades.

In the first trial, Imam received a three-month sentence. He will appeal, no doubt. In the second one, Imam’s case was dismissed. But Imam’s situation is one of the many examples that Egyptians have witnessed lately, situations that exemplify the Islamist mode of thinking and the reaction of Egyptians to it.

Every day a new story about a ban or a curtailment emerges and circulates. The examples are many: Naguib Mahfouz’s novels promote prostitution and drugs, as the Salafi candidate, Shahhat, reiterated. 26 The age of marriage for girls should be lowered to 14; 27 or teaching English is a foreign plot. 28 These stories are leaving Egyptians bewildered and in total disbelief. More importantly, the pious men—and women--they

elected for the parliament and to lead the country are neglecting the main issues and focusing on promoting ignorance.

Some of these weird initiatives have occurred to test the waters. Islamists want to see how far they can go; they’d like to make social and political amendments that would suit their ways, so they try their luck in the hopes that the approach will gain momentum. If it works, so be it; if it doesn’t, nothing is lost.

One of these let’s-test-the-waters episodes was seen when member Mamdouh Ismail of the Salafi party, Al Nour, recited the call for prayers in parliament. Ismail was making a point: that parliament should not convene when prayer is due, and that prayer should be performed before and ahead of any other duty or task.

Had he succeeded, many changes would have taken place. If parliament was to stop functioning at certain times, then the same would occur regarding when lectures start, shops close, and movie theatres run. Everyone would be expected to stop what he or she is doing to pray, which is not the case in Egypt today. People continue to attend classes, go about their business, and postpone praying until a more convenient time. And Islam allows people a few hours to pray, and if unable, they can pray at a later time.

Had Ismail managed to change the protocol by which parliament convenes, it would have entailed far more changes across Egypt. Sure his effort this time around did not reap any benefit, but who knows? It may work the next time around—that’s all it takes: an effort.

I find Ismail’s effort frivolous, but a more risky Islamic image is seen in the actions of people such as Azza El Garf. Azza El Garf is one of the few women parliamentarians elected in the last parliament election. Because she is a woman, her in-total agreement with the laws that diminish women to slaves and objects, is quite frightening. “She has made a splash by talking about tightening Egypt’s already stringent divorce laws, rolling back the ban on female genital mutilation, and reportedly denying that sexual harassment exists in Egypt.”

In all the above mentioned cases, the Islamists in parliament have portrayed a peculiarly opaque picture of what would be considered agreeable under the auspices of Islam: women returned to the harem times, entertainment curbed, and far-reaching control of how life is led in Egypt today.

The question now is whether Islamists gained from these stories. I believe that all these stories have portrayed Islamists as ignorant and biased. Stories go viral and in the process demean the image of Muslim parliamentarians. Islamists are not ignorant, so it is a shame that they continue to make demands that belittle their cause and their image.

The question remains: why do they choose this path? It is easy to get votes about issues such as control of women—and harder to make decisions about, or make the populace understand, more complex issues such as how to create jobs, or feed a family. One thing is clear, the Islamists will continue to fervently pursue change until they accomplish their goal: turning Egypt into an Islamic state.

Meanwhile, these stories, once they hit the media, have demeaned the Islamists’ cause. In fact, liberal Egyptians are ecstatic; they want to give Islamists enough rope to hang themselves. Islamists have stained the image of Islam, much to chagrin of moderate Islamists. Talk to the pious who may have chosen a fundamentalist, and they will tell you immediately that they will not vote for one again.

A word of caution to Islamists: stop belittling yourselves. The approach taken to date will work against you. Islam is far greater—much superior to—what you are making it. Egyptians will definitely lose faith in your parties and your notions though they will never lose faith in Islam.
Don’t blink, for in the nanosecond between having your eyes open, then shut, then open again, the Egyptian political scene will have changed dramatically. Lately, events have been shaping up so rapidly and so unexpectedly that Egyptians remain out of breath, out of the loop, and quite light-headed.

Where does one start? A good example of the whirlwind Egyptians have faced is corroborated by the ups and downs of Hazim Abou Ismail, the Salafi ex-presidential hopeful. First, he decides to run and emerges as a strong candidate gaining huge support. He campaigns forcefully leaving liberals baffled by the intensity of his approach; then his mother’s citizenship is questioned, but the court concludes his mother is an Egyptian after all, only to have the Presidential Election Commission disqualify him from the race for the same reason.

Ismail cries foul denouncing the American and Egyptian authorities for providing “forged” documents, and he appeals the ruling. Finally, the Election Commission does not accept any of the appeals presented including Abou Ismail’s. His followers are furious, and demonstrations and sit-ins ensue—Abou Ismail goes from an apolitical Egyptian, to
In search of a president

a political figure, to a probable president, to a fraud, and finally to a person non gratis—all in a matter of days.

The Founding Committee of the Constitution or the Constituent Assembly, as it is otherwise called, is another case in point. According to the constitution referendum, the committee is a body of 100 members chosen to draft the new constitution—50 percent from parliament and 50 percent from renowned figures. However, the referendum does not specify exactly how the members are to be chosen. So members of parliament chose non-parliamentary members largely from parliamentarian Islamists; in other words, the MPs chose the outsiders from their own group. And slowly but surely all non-Islamist members withdrew from the committee in an act of defiance. Finally the State Court suspended the committee as it stood.

The tug of war in Abou Ismail’s case and over the Founding Committee of the Constitution is indicative of widespread changing scenarios. In the meantime, Egyptians are trying hard to fathom each new bombshell, but the causes and outcomes are all beyond the understanding of ordinary Egyptians.

Is there a hidden agenda behind these twists and turns? Are the blunders intentional or coincidental? Are they indicative of a superpower—Egyptian or otherwise—that wants to play havoc with the stability of Egypt?

If one can say that the changes and the transformations that have taken place recently were the makings of a single person, and that that “someone” knew all along the outcome of such events, then I would elect this person as the president of Egypt for being the mastermind behind so many upheavals. He is definitely ahead of the game, and ahead of everyone in Egypt.

Could anyone have foreseen Abou Ismail’s mother’s dual citizenship? Would someone have anticipated, amidst the campaigning contest Ismail was flailing, his being disqualified? Did one envisage the withdrawal of the liberals and leftists on the constitution committee only to have the court suspend the committee’s activities? Add another twist: would anybody have predicted the passing away of the wife of Ahmed
Shafik, the presidential candidate, a fact that may have gained him some empathy? No.

So why are events in general and the presidential race, in particular, resonating so much volatility? And leading to so much turmoil?

The first reason for this volatility is the availability and immediacy of news. Egypt lived six decades of almost total political blackout—Egyptians were never made aware of the wheeling and dealing that took place behind closed doors. Today, in contrast, it is difficult to keep a lid on information. News, real or made up, reaches Egyptians as it is being shaped and is redistributed electronically. Then, worthy news goes viral, reaching millions. Obviously, millions of Egyptians are utilizing social media—blogging and tweeting—from within the eyes of storms.

Another reason is the change in Egyptians themselves. Egyptians, again for six decades, enjoyed an indifferent, blasé attitude towards the goings and comings of their country. They didn’t have much hope, especially in recent decades, and consequently went about their businesses ignoring the political scene and putting it on the backburner. But suddenly, and after the Revolution, they have become keen and avid followers of Egyptian politics. Soap operas are taking a nosedive, while political talk shows are gaining ground with amazing speed.

Talk to Egyptians on the street, and more often than not, their responses are right on the mark. Talk to a taxi driver and you will find him exceptionally well informed on article 28 of the constitution. Sit amongst café visitors on a busy street and everyone has an opinion on presidential candidates and their platforms. This newfound zeal to read into events, to worry about the choice of leader, and to be concerned about one’s country is all new to Egyptians.

On a more negative side though, it is in the nature of Egyptians—and perhaps many others—to want to come across as though they are well informed and up to date, that they have an “in” somehow and can decipher events and happenings. Ask an Egyptian for directions, and that person will guide you even if he doesn’t know the exact route. No one says, “I don’t know”—quite the contrary; the person would say, “Take the next right.”
By the same token, when a piece of news surfaces, right away Egyptians will dissect and analyze the reasons behind the event as if they have inside knowledge. Take, for example, the Presidential Election Commission’s decision to disqualify ten presidential hopefuls. Immediately, streets and media hummed and buzzed like a beehive and got jammed with innuendos and wisecracks. Reasons, doers and backers, and the integrity or its lack in those disqualified, and in the committee itself, are discussed openly and loudly.

How could Omar Suleiman, one of the most formidable Egyptians of the previous regime, the Spy Chief, not count accurately and hand in 31 fewer support letters than required? And why doesn’t Abou Ismail simply present the papers that validate his mother’s citizenship? But of course, El Shater is being disqualified over a technicality, same for Aymen Nour. What about the Commission itself? They’ve disqualified candidates from both sides only to come across as fair. The list goes on. Egyptians have outdone themselves in trying to analyze events.

But most importantly, Egyptians wanted immediate change. They wanted the Revolution to resurrect a free and just Egypt with authorities willing to work on pressing issues such as education and poverty. And they would have liked to choose the perfect president to represent them along this path. They had hoped that people, authorities, and parties would embrace the Revolution and start afresh, but as the Arabic saying goes, “the winds do not blow as ships desire them to.” Yes, the Revolution led to freedom of choice—and that gave people the right to choose parties and presidents, but simultaneously polarized the whole nation. Instead of having one umbrella encompassing the whole society, the society has divided, each group sheltering under its own umbrella, instead of a single one emblazoned with the word Egypt.

As for the presidential race, it is going to be a tenuous task to find a president whom all Egyptians would find fitting for the position: a president with integrity, political astuteness, no allegiance to the previous regime, charisma, and the ability to unite the different factions—some task that is going to be.

In the meantime, don’t blink, or else the Egyptian political scene may shift again, and the next time you open your eyes, all will have changed.
The Egyptian presidential race: what a difference!
May 17, 2012

Exactly a week before Egyptians abroad were to begin casting their votes, Egyptian expatriates received emails from the Election Commission telling them exactly how to vote. The email provided these Egyptians with a link to the forms, which they were to download and send to embassies around the world. The forms listed all the necessary information: name in full, ID Card number, election password, and clear, specific directions—all what the voter needed was follow instructions.

It was quite impressive, for this single email told Egyptians about to vote how far they had come. The commission was organized enough to send emails to every single voter abroad, to do it early enough so that expats didn’t need to send their votes rush service across various continents, and to offer exact information again so voters didn’t resort to others for clarification; all this left voters in awe. And all I could say was “Positive change is in the works!”

This was at the personal level: how to vote, where to send applications, etc. But the whole election process has been, so far, a success. Yes, the revolution has indeed created this change.
Egyptian elections in the past were rubberstamped. Today, candidates are working hard to gain ground and appease voters, a humbling realization. They realize that if they are chosen, they will have to work for the people, not for themselves. And what a stark difference this is!

Then a debate was conducted between Aboul Fetouh and Moussa, the two leading presidential candidates. In that it was the first presidential debate in the history of the Arab World, it was truly an accomplishment. Competitive, and with bare-knuckled rounds, the debate also adhered to strict guidelines and timelines, a remarkable feat by any standard.

One thought that kept recurring was this: what if Mubarak had been asked to participate in such a debate? The more I thought about it, the more I realized how far we had come. The man would have been the laughing stock of all Egyptians. First, he would have never agreed to partake in such a debate, not only because he considered himself above such trivialities but also because he wouldn’t have been able to take the pressure. Neither his borderline intelligence nor his average speaking skills would have allowed him to join in such a venture. He would also have failed miserably as a contender.

This made me appreciate the debaters more. The two candidates stood their ground for a good five hours, answering straightforward and often difficult questions. True, viewers expected more—some think both debaters lost, but they need only compare it to the imaginary one with Mubarak in it to be extremely satisfied.

Egypt is indeed in the midst of a hot presidential election. People are eager to learn about candidates, and the more they learn the more they fluctuate between hopefuls; they listen to what candidates are advocating, and they finally form their own opinions and choices.

By the same token, candidates are careful to voice what Egyptians want and avoid what was abhorred in Mubarak’s era. They are surely working hard to promote their visions even if these promises may never be realized in the coming years: the president is here to serve the people, the wife of the president is not the first lady, the president vows not to move from his current residence, and a president’s family has absolutely no clout or preferential treatment.
A television program named “Who is the President?” has the host, Tarek Habib, asking presidential candidates the same set of questions. Through a safer and more relaxed venue than the debate, Egyptians get a glimpse of the different ideologies and platforms. It is a good window into the presidential choices Egyptians will be making: the dreamer, the organizer, the diplomat, and the Islamist, in addition, of course, to the adamant, the pompous, the easily angered, the blunt, and the crafty.

On a more sobering note, we have yet to see what the candidates will do to “buy” votes as we get closer to the voting dates, an aspect that we can’t ignore but must live with. I’m also quite worried that Islamists will gain more ground and capture the presidency, too; and I’m definitely concerned about the Egypt that will emerge after all this, but fair is fair; the presidential election process itself has, so far, been encouraging and promising.

Yes, these are good times!

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A realization—President Morsi’s performance in such a debate would have been even worse than Mubarak’s. President Morsi’s speeches come in two versions, the prepared one, which is informative and rational, and the impromptu one, which is confusing and distorted. Much of what President Morsi says, if not read, is debacle.
Vote strategically, but is anyone listening?

May 22, 2012

In the US 2012 election, the race will be between two hopefuls: Obama and Romney; in France, it was between Hollande and Sarkozy. Only in Egypt is a presidential election race amongst 13 candidates, and until the eve of the elections, with millions undecided, the vote may sway one way or the other.

Over 1200 candidates applied to become Egypt’s first civilian president. Most of these wishful candidates were disallowed, and Egyptians were left with 23 nominees. Even these 23 hopeful had 10 disqualified. Only 13 remained.

From these 13, five carry enough clout to be mentioned: Moussa, Aboul Fetouh, Sabahi, Shafik, and Morsi. You would think that the weeding out task has simplified matters for Egyptians, but that is not the case; the candidate who will end up being Egypt’s next president is still neither confirmed nor guaranteed today, May 22, the eve before Egyptians go to the polls.

In spite of the gag order, the Egyptian street scene is buzzing with speculations. “Whom will you vote for?” ask Egyptians of one another. Millions are still undecided and millions others are fractioned mostly amongst these five candidates.
Though worried about the outcome, or maybe because of these
trepidations, Egyptians are taking their first rights seriously. They plan
to stand for hours, yet again, to cast their votes. On Facebook, Egyptians
are bracing themselves for a long, long day. Messages such as, “I’ll be
voting in Heliopolis at Al Orouba School; if anyone is voting there, let’s
team up and chat; it’ll be a long haul,” are being posted.

And because of the seriousness of the outcome, they are all set
to choose whom they consider the best candidate assuming him the
person to lead Egypt out of the current mess.

At the end of the day, Egypt has been left with two Islamic candi-
dates: Aboul Fetouh and Morsi; and three liberals: Moussa, Shafik, and
Sabahi. Of the three liberals, two are considered feloul, i.e. remnants
of the old regime—Moussa and Shafik, leaving only one candidate
unscathed: Sabahi.

Sabahi started off with an insignificant following, but has gained
popularity and strength as the race progressed. Still, his following may
fall short of the needed numbers, and according to the polls, he is not
the leading candidate. The issue is: will I lose my vote if I give it to
Sabahi? What are the consequences of giving my vote to someone who
will not win?

The other two liberals have their own issues. Shafik, too, is gaining
ground, but he comes with too much baggage. Being Mubarak’s
last chosen Prime Minister, he is the closest of all candidates to the
old regime.

Though I believe that Shafik would be a strong, effective leader,
many Egyptians refute his rights to lead the country, associating him
with the old regime and Mubarak’s cronies. Shafik may indeed cause
more turbulence than good especially in the upcoming period.

Moussa is losing ground because of his superficial association with
Mubarak, which is a real shame. Many Egyptians are stamping him with
the same stamp that stains Shafik. Moussa should not be considered
feloul and should not be associated with Mubarak, but that is how the
cookie crumbles.

Finally we come to the two Islamists. Fetouh is now being named
the chameleon, associating him with the reptile that changes colour
according to social conditions. Fetouh has strong ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, though he opts not to come across as such. An Islamist voter would vote for Fetouh without thinking twice.

Morsi is the Islamic candidate fair and square. If anything, liberals should be wary of votes that go to him. Morsi also has the affluent Muslim Brotherhood behind him, and he has had the resources to advertise aggressively.

Whom will you vote for, then? This is the dilemma. For what it’s worth: vote strategically; choose wisely, not with your heart, and be aware of the consequences; vote for the candidate who has the potential to win against the Islamic torrent; look at the polls; see who already has the potential to win—from amongst the liberals and choose him.

The Revolution has brought changes and improvement—this election is a case in point—but it also brought out a strong Islamic front that will change Egypt as we know it. I say being a “feloul,” is bad, but more importantly, turning Egypt into an Islamic state is worse.

With a heavy heart, I await the results of this historic election.
The worst-case scenario: the second round
May 26, 2012

The first round of the historic presidential elections is over and results are in. The runoff will be between Shafik, of the old regime; and Morsi, of the Muslim Brotherhood. The worst-case scenario has materialized in front of our eyes—and agonized Egyptians are asking themselves, yet again, whom they will vote for. Egyptians may sit out this round merely out of sheer exhaustion, if not because they don’t want either candidate.

Personally, I’m dismayed. After all these agonizing months of waiting for a president that will assist Egyptians out of their turmoil, Egyptians are left with the two most unlikely and most undeserving candidates.

Shafik comes with baggage from here to eternity. He was a minister under Mubarak’s auspices, and the last prime minister chosen by toppled Mubarak. During his brief serving as such, he alienated and infuriated revolutionists. A “disrespectful child” was the phrase he used to describe protestors. But the epitome of disgust towards Shafik was seen while he was voting during the presidential elections. Shafik was chased out of the riding as voters hurled shoes and stones at his car.

In all fairness to the man though, Shafik was not stained by any of the charges Mubarak’s cronies have been imprisoned for. He’s a veteran
In search of a president

on national, if not international, fronts. He also successfully built the huge airport empire that has changed the face of Egypt for incoming travelers.

The troubling issue is how activists will react if Shafik wins the second round. Occupying Tahrir becomes probable, bringing Egypt back to square one. Or will democracy reign? And more importantly, how would Shafik, the president then, react to disgruntled demonstrators?

Morsi has been named the “spare,” as in the spare tire. Morsi replaced El Shater, the MB’s first choice for presidency, when the latter was disqualified. Egyptians did not give Morsi much attention since they thought he had no chance to win the presidential election. Morsi neither has the charisma nor appeal, though this is neither here nor there. More importantly, Morsi has insufficient political or leading experience. He has had very little legislative or governing duties. His affiliation to the Muslim Brotherhood is his only accomplishment.

It is clear that the MB clan with Morsi at the wheel will have absolute free rein of Egypt since both the parliament and the presidency will be under its control. They will in the long run implement rigid Sharia laws, an act that has worried moderate Islamists, liberals, and Copts alike.

The Muslim Brotherhood is a lucid entity. Their mission is to enjoy a wider Islamic presence. Egypt as a country, its progress and advancement, don’t construe validity or importance. Ultimately, though it might take decades, Egypt will become part of a larger Islamic caliphate emerging as a force to control and fight for its presence “with the sword.” It’s a systemic plan worth our attention.

The Muslim Brotherhood has succeeded in infiltrating many societies. Their presence is seen in Syria, Libya, and Tunisia. They also have deep associations with Hamas in Gaza. This while Gulf States’ leaders today are worried that Egyptian expats may belong to the Brotherhood, and they fear these Egyptians may be turning Gulf citizens against their leaders. This is what the foundation of a caliphate looks like.

This brings Egyptians to a particularly painful junction: both choices are precarious; both choices will bring tumultuous times. True, Shafik’s disarray will occur instantly since those who backed the revolution
and stood their ground for 18 glorious days will not forfeit their hopes easily, even if it simultaneously means accepting democracy.

Morsi’s turbulence will start early, too; immediately, parliament will issue its archaic bills and focus on how to constrain women’s rights even further—the Islamists have this thing towards women: by restricting them, things get better. In addition, progress and advancement will be placed on the back burner. This will be the start, but slowly but surely changes by Islamists would see Egypt become one province in an Islamic state. This is the fear that haunts liberalists.

Egyptians then are caught between a rock and a hard place, but it is truly up to them to decide where Egypt will go from here. No, Americans and the West are not maneuvering matters; Saudis and Gulf States are not interfering. It will be Egyptians, fair and square, who decide how they would like their new Egypt to be.

The next few weeks will be decisive; nothing is guaranteed. Just have these two candidates debate in a deliberation similar to Moussa and Aboul Fetouh’s, and the pendulum will shift ever so quickly from one side to another as it clearly did during the primary round alienating Egyptians from both debaters.

As much as I fear the immediate consequences of having Shafik win, I dread the MB taking over even more. So under duress I will vote for Shafik. In Egypt there is a saying, “How come you chose this bitterness? Response: I chose it because of what was bitterer.”
Your vote and what you may end up losing over it
June 3, 2012

In my naiveté, I had thought that my schoolmate on Facebook had gone off on a long holiday, or maybe he had smartened up and stopped writing unnecessary wise cracks. I realized today, since another follower was responding to him, though I couldn’t see my friend’s original note, that indeed, he had blocked me. Hmmm, I said.

We had had a brief bicker over his calling the Egyptian army officers “cowards” who had fled the 1967 war scene. My response was, “Don’t go there; what is happening in Egypt now has absolutely nothing to do with the Egyptian army. The dispute today is with SCAF not the Egyptian army.” I guess the harsh words that he spewed then were not satisfactory, so he blocked me. What a pity, I said. A friendship that goes back over 50 years is gone.

This adversarial tone and approach prevails in Egypt today and in particular re the presidential elections. Egyptians are fighting tooth and nail to have others accept their favorite candidates, and in the process have split in every way possible. True, the choices have narrowed down to only two presidential hopefuls, but Egypt has plunged into a deep pit of polarization and even hatred.
The second presidential round is between Shafik, of Mubarak’s regime, and Morsi, of the Ikhwan, the Muslim Brotherhood. You would think that this is how the perfect election should be—with only two candidates, but it is dividing Egyptians even further, making them vehemently antagonistic towards one another. That is at one level; at other levels, fierce fist fights and brawls have ensued.

From the over-20 million voters that participated in the first round, Shafik got around 5 million votes. This number will not decrease during the second round; quite the contrary, it will rise. Shafik will get Moussa’s votes, and maybe even a minor cluster of those who voted for Sabbahi. Some will vote for Shafik because he is the lesser of two evils. While some voters, out of sheer exhaustion, hope that Shafik may be firm enough to bring Egypt back to normalcy.

Morsi has a predominately Islamic following. He will gain from Fetouh’s defeat. Morsi will get his extra votes from the pious, the easily swayed, and disappointingly, the bought. Morsi may get some of Sabbahi’s votes, in addition to the votes of those who hate Shafik’s connection to Mubarak.

But a third group is emerging. Many Egyptians plan to boycott the election—voting null. This group wishes to present to the incoming president a foreboding warning. The boycotters are saying that they are here for the long haul. Though I wouldn’t go that route myself, I respect their decision to forego voting.

More importantly, advocates of the three groups are vehement and deafening in their effort to sway voters. I’m still with all this; I find it healthy and robust.

My concern is that in the process, we have lost our ability to listen and fathom. We are not fair or accepting. I watch and listen as friends and family members bicker and turn into rivals and enemies. And I worry about the Egypt that will emerge after all this. Will it be any similar to the one we knew before?

Life in Egypt will go on, whether Morsi or Shafik wins. Egypt will outlive both by far. We may lose friends and associates over our choices, but in a matter of a year or two, we will realize that we both were
wrong, that indeed yet another winner has clasped the reign by some unidentified ability and by pulling the rug from under our feet.

I shudder every time I think that close friends forfeit mutual companionship because one supported Shafik and the other supported Morsi. The incoming president, and especially after the revolution, will come and go, and yet we, the people, should remain hopeful and forgiving. And we in the meantime should exude every effort to come through this ordeal unscathed and unharmed.

Egypt will remain tall and firm to the extent its people do the same. Let’s hope for the best.

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The boycotters may have tilted the vote to Morsi’s favour. They, like all liberals, have lived to regret it.
Egyptians: damned if they do and damned if they don’t

June 16, 2012

Egyptians have gone to the polls, yet again—this time to elect the president of Egypt. It’s been a long 18 months, with Egypt on the cusp of anarchy and with Egyptians facing anguish, bloodshed, and chaos, but Egypt is almost there—at the end of the struggle. Or is it? Will the incoming president bring peace and stability, or will he cause another round of violence and disarray?

Only a few days back and precisely on the eve of the presidential elections, the court ordered that the Islamic-majority parliament be dissolved reverting its power to the army council. It decided that a third of the MPs elected were elected illegally.

I’m dubious about the process, the timing, and the legality of the whole matter; furthermore, it is not clear whom the incoming president will swear allegiance to on June 22: the Supreme Council of Armed Forces and Field marshal Tantawi in particular, or the Supreme Constitutional Court.

On the streets two opinions have unfolded. One group is jubilant that somehow, by hook or by crook, the Islamic parliament has been dissolved. The Islamist parties’ popularity has waned drastically in the
last little while. The Islamist parliamentarians had exploited the short reign in power to the best of their abilities, so it wasn’t mere fear mongering that caused them to be distrusted and ostracized by many. Ironically, they had waited for this glorious moment for almost eighty years only to lose it in a few months.

On the other hand, many see the timing and the dissolution of the parliament in itself as a ploy by the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) to remain in power. The word on the street is “soft coup.” “Are we back to square one?” they ask. Some are wondering if a revolution had taken place at all.

It is clear that Egypt has become divided. The revolution has succeeded in bringing out the division that existed but was never brought to the forefront. Though the majority of Egyptians are Muslims, they have become divided into Islamists or non-Islamists.

Let’s say that Shafik wins the race. Many disgruntled Egyptians will take to the streets yet again. To this group Shafik brings back the old regime and its ways. The same group will vow that the elections were rigged, that Tantawi’s junta played it well, that the judicial system in Egypt is bought and manipulated, and that the revolution will continue no matter what.

Shafik’s winning to them will be proof beyond a shadow of a doubt that SCAF has stage-managed the whole farce and will never leave power. The fear is that it may turn into a second revolutionary wave leaving Egypt no further ahead.

If Morsi wins, millions of liberal Egyptians who see the Islamists as a group hungry for power will become distraught with fear. They see their world shattered and lost amidst the acceptable and unacceptable: taboos, do’s and don’ts, obedience, and sacrileges. They fear the Iranian Islamic version of statehood.

I voted for Shafik not for the love of Shafik but to avoid the Islamic empire. Now I’m wondering if Morsi’s victory may have some salient aspects to it.

If Morsi wins, his victory would prove to the distrustful that SCAF did not operate the back scenes of the election, and that indeed “their man” did not win. It may also mean that Egyptians may accept the
integrity of the Egyptian judicial system. These factors may alleviate the anger on the streets.

Yet in spite of the merits of having Morsi win, the Islamists will continue to dominate and may cause more harm in the long run, more so than the retaliations against Shafik.

Then again, those protesting will continue to find fault; it has become the name of the game. In a sense it’s good vigilance, and in another, it leaves the country in an ongoing mess.

In both scenarios, Egyptians are damned, at least for the time being, and will face a few more hurdles before they set themselves on the right path. There is no perfect scenario. The long-awaited “new” Egypt has a long ways to go.
How fearful the month of June seemed
June 26, 2012

For the last few months, I’ve been voicing my worries and concerns regarding the happenings that were to occur in June going as far as bluntly saying, “June will be a very black month in the history of Egypt.” “Black” implied bloodshed and chaos Egypt wide. But June has come and almost gone, and Egyptians have proven me wrong yet again.

Prior to the sentencing of Hosni Mubarak, the rumour mill had him acquitted, pardoned, forgiven, or serving a maximum two-year sentence. On June 2, Hosni Mubarak, the ousted president, was sentenced to life imprisonment. He was transferred immediately to Torra Prison, only to be moved to an army hospital in Maadi after suffering some apparently serious medical complications.

Granted there have been demonstrations, but the system, whether it is the army or the courts, has proven the distrustful and the disbelieving wrong. The first event in June proved uneventful.

The second June event was the Supreme Court barring Shafik, the run-off candidate, by a constitutional law from continuing with the presidential race. On June 14, the Supreme Court decided that Shafik could continue with the race. And on the same day, the same Court
called for the dissolution of the Parliament by declaring the parliamen-
tary vote unconstitutional.

Both proceedings ended with protestors congregating in Tahrir for yet another standoff, but even that did not spark an esca-
alted confrontation.

But the most worrisome and disconcerting event was the second
round of presidential election. The run-off was to be between Shafik,
who represents the old regime in the eyes of many, and Morsi, who
speaks for the Muslim Brotherhood. Most Egyptians had an aversion
to both, resulting in a lot of negative voting against the candidate who
appalled voters the most.

Egyptians went to the polls June 17 and 18, and the results came
out June 24, after a nail biting, nerve-racking week. The repercussions
from the election fallout were to be clear: Egyptians will go to the
streets to express their disapproval. In fact, both the police and the army
forces roamed Cairo streets showing a strong presence in anticipation
of clashes. Some Egyptians started buying food and rations to fore-
stall shortages.

Despite the time lost counting the votes, despite Morsi clearly threat-
ening to reject the results if they were not to his favour, and despite a
Tahrir livid with Morsi’s followers, Egypt came out unscathed.

But Morsi won, and Shafik conceded in a manner akin to that
of worldly leaders. And the Muslim Brotherhood celebrated to their
heart’s content in Tahrir. And as much as I would have preferred Shafik
to Morsi, I’m relieved that the imminent bloodshed that might have
followed had Shafik won did not take place.

Again Egyptians didn’t fail me. As I was waiting for total pandemo-
nium, relative peace prevailed. The irony here is that the president, who
is now being hailed as the head of Egypt, would have been the one to
instigate the bloodshed by calling his followers to protest.

June has come and almost gone without any casualties; not only
that, but it will be hailed in history as the month when Egypt got its
first civilian president after a long list of army presidents. This is reason
to rejoice.
In search of a president

Now, it is really up to Morsi to hold this country together. He has an assortment of portfolios to work through.

The first is to whom he will swear allegiance. The Freedom and Justice Party announced that Morsi will be sworn in to the dissolved parliament. This may lead to the first face-off between SCAF and the new president.

Morsi also needs to unite all fronts by having representatives from every sect and wing working towards a unified Egypt: Copts, women, and liberals must be represented in the future government.

This may lead to Morsi distancing himself somewhat from the Brotherhood, but it is inevitable if he plans on convincing the 49 percent of voters who did not vote for him that he is fair, just, and representative of all Egyptians.

But after June many months will follow, each presenting Egyptians with one hurdle after another. Egyptians will take it in stride as they have managed to do so with all other stumbling blocks.

Yes, Egypt is on an unpredictable path, one that can take it either way. But the outcome for the month of June suggests better months ahead.
The Egyptian Presidential Elections have come and gone; Mohamed Morsi, the Islamic candidate, has become president and will be sworn in on Saturday, June 30, 2012. So now Egyptians have shifted their attention to other critical matters.

They have turned to Um Ahmed, as she prefers to be called, or the Egyptian First Lady, as she prefers not to be called. Mrs. Morsi has also suggested a few other options by which she could be referred to: after Um Ahmed, which is her favourite, the President’s wife or the First Servant are both acceptable.

Let’s see this in its appropriate perspective. Um Ahmed happens to be the wife of the first civil Egyptian president, a fact that is pivotal in itself. She is also the wife of supposedly a very influential man in the Arab World and the region altogether. Surely a keen interest in her is expected.

Needless to say, Naglaa Ali Mahmoud, who has kept her maiden name—quite common in Egypt—has suddenly become the talk of the town. She is creating a stir and attracting quite a bit of commotion.
nationally and internationally proving that Egyptians are not the only ones curious about her.

Um Ahmed dresses in simple Islamic attire, monochromatic, with a draping long veil that loosely reaches her knees. But more important than her attire, Mrs. Morsi seems down to earth and easy to get along with. She has a calm, serene smile that exudes warmth. But she also seems witty and unpretentious; when a reporter asks if he can take her photograph, she responds, “Only if your photos make me look younger and a little thinner.”

Um Ahmed is indeed a very simple Egyptian who has suddenly found herself in the limelight. She doesn’t look or sound as though she is seeking the publicity; nevertheless, she is getting it because obviously people want to know more about the woman who will be representing them around the world, if she opts to do so.

Egyptians are divided here.

Many Egyptians look at Um Ahmed and, primarily, feel humbled. She resembles millions of Egyptian mothers, a tweet says. And a Facebook comment asks people to avoid putting down Mrs. Morsi because of this maternal demeanor.

But others are used to another kind of First Lady, the one who could represent Egyptians amidst queens and other first ladies. Some Egyptians have always looked up to the first lady for fashion, opinion, etiquette, and presence. And more importantly they always expected her to play a fundamental public role.

These others are also saying, “But I don’t want a mother to represent me!” To those, their mothers’ roles should in no way be equated to the role of the most important woman in Egypt. They had expected a different person with a different image. These Egyptians are frustrated and disappointed.

It is not going to be easy to satisfy all Egyptians. They want neither a docile and complacent wife, nor an opinionated, self-centered, and dominant diva. Balance is going to be of the essence here.

I’m on the fence on this one. I’d like to wait and see how Mrs. Morsi handles her prominent role. I cannot build my opinion on someone’s apparel alone. I need to see what Mrs. Morsi is capable of doing. Egyptians in need—the main reason why the revolution came to be—may actually relate to her modest and plain look more than they would to a fancily dressed and beautifully coiffed persona.

It may also depend on whether Mrs. Morsi plans to get involved in public work. She could play a significant role in the life of the unfortunate. By reaching out to those in need and finding resources and ways to improve their lives, Mrs. Morsi would ultimately be accepted by everyone, even the critical and the elite.

Still Mrs. Morsi may choose not to play any role whatsoever. This will give Morsi’s critics more fodder for criticism.

Indeed, Egyptians must not form premature opinions but give Mrs. Morsi a fair chance. I’m looking forward to seeing Mrs. Morsi prove herself to Egyptians. She may feel uncomfortable amongst royalty and diplomats, but if she exhibits an effort in helping those truly in need and worthy of her time, all Egyptians will accept her.

Whether Um Ahmed resembles Egyptian mothers or not is trivial. What matters is what this particular mother will do.

Um Ahmed has put an end to this discussion: She isn’t enticed to play a role in the life of Egyptians, even the needy and the beleaguered. The only time she ventured out of her secure environment was the day she paid her respects to the fallen Muslim Brotherhood victim. Even this move on her part infuriated Egyptians. See “Morsi unites Egyptians,” November 30, 2012.
Seven members of the Constitution Committee, the committee writing the new Egyptian constitution, refuse to stand while the Egyptian anthem is being played. Their reason: Music and songs are prohibited in Islam. Most Egyptians are furious; how can these close-minded and arrogant few be the ones on whom Egyptians have bestowed the honor of writing the country’s constitution? Can it possibly be a just constitution under such circumstances? To some, their action is tantamount to treason.

In Basrah, Ameryiah, close to Alexandria, Salafi villagers force the village church visitors out. They insist that the priest ask the visitors to leave. Their cause: none. This is arrogance and an assumption of superiority.

Both incidences above are corroborated.

Many other incidents or rumours about them are scaring moderate Egyptians and Christians alike. There is the jizya, a tax Christians may be asked to pay for being Christians, the dress code that may be imposed on women, and the sudden surge of harassment that unveiled women are facing. The rumours may be just that, but they are hitting
the main stream hard. The stories mentioned here are a small proportion of those circulating in cyberspace and on the street.

Do these stories represent blind conservatism, emerging power, or mere defiance? Well, an amalgamation of all the above.

Salafis and extreme Muslims have always refuted the accepted Egyptian norm. Even thirty years ago, rigid Islamists would refuse to attend weddings because of the dancing and singing associated with such joyous events. Many others would quickly bring out their handkerchiefs to cover their hands so as to avoid touching a woman’s hand. Better yet, they refused to shake women’s hands or vice versa altogether. I actually know of a teacher of English who refused to teach the conditional tense—If I had this, this would’ve happened—since if “opens the door to the devil.”

All this was bewildering but acceptable to moderate Egyptians because it was not forced upon them. The women in the black niqab and the bearded men in the short galabiyas had their lives and the moderates had theirs. Though flabbergasted at one another’s outlooks, the two groups lived peaceably together in the land of Egypt, never interfering in one another’s ways.

However, the Islamists have emerged as a force to be reckoned with. It came early on during the revolution when suddenly the bearded men tripled in a matter of a few days, held the Saudi flag or even the black Qaeda one in Tahrir, and began to boldly voice their demands. Mubarak had held them back with an iron fist, but they breathed freedom immediately after he was toppled.

This remained fair and just since all Egyptians have every right to practice their beliefs. Who am I to tell another Egyptian what he should believe or not believe in? To each their own, the liberals also said.

With the arrival of Morsi, though he personally has absolutely nothing to do with it, an explicit change occurred. The Islamists became even more defiant. It was as though they captured the reign and became the proprietors of Egypt—telling all how to lead their lives. Egypt had become theirs.
Morsi as president

Well, I’m afraid this will not happen. My fellow Islamists, this is my Egypt, too. You cannot change my way to fit your style. I’m me and you are you. You will not tell me to lead my life the way you please.

Egyptians will continue to enjoy culture, music, and beauty. Egyptians will remain open to the outside world and appreciate the happenings around them. And Egyptians have a history that they will be proud of: always. They will remain a diverse people.

I personally will continue to listen to my favorite singers and music, dance to my heart’s content if I so please, and have the wind blow through my hair for sheer delight. I will continue to expand my knowledge; I will read and watch everything that I think will help me to do so. In other words, I will remain myself.

The bottom line is I won’t allow you to change me as much as I won’t try to change you. This is called freedom of choice. We can live together; it’s up to you to accept that choice.

To avoid an imminent abyss, to be a country that opens its arms to all its citizens and visitors, and to continue to grow as a nation, we have to accept the terms and conditions that come with modern times. Anything else will bring this nation down.

To everyone his own I say, to everyone his own.
**Yes, Egyptians are admirably different**

*July 16, 2012*

Since he was ousted, Mubarak has been shuttled between one hospital and another. Originally, after his toppling, he had thought that he could live peacefully in Sharm El Sheik, in his magnificent and opulent residence. He had also expected to be left alone to enjoy his retirement even if away from the glorious limelight. This, much to his chagrin, did not happen. Egyptians adamantly pursued his prosecution.

Granted he didn’t get what he had hoped for, still, after his life-in-prison sentence, Mubarak didn’t see the inside of Torra Prison but for a few days. Soon afterwards, he was transferred to another hospital, yet again, the Maadi Army Hospital this time, where he remains hospitalized until today.

After every drastic measure against him—his being called in for questioning and his sentencing—Mubarak underwent a severe medical episode where his lawyers and protectors pronounced him “clinically dead” or suffering from life-threatening complications. These sudden and calculated bouts landed him in one hospital after another instead of in prison. Once Mubarak was transferred to such a hospital—his home for the following few months, he always seemed to bounce back to life. This routine has occurred several times since his stepping down.
Though some may see protecting Mubarak from spending much time in prison as the behavior of “feloul,” remnants of Mubarak’s regime, it is actually a poignant depiction of the Egyptian mentality, for many Egyptians would have found disgracing Mubarak hard to digest. To them, an ex-president should be judged and sentenced but never shamed. This translates to the following: Mubarak will never be a free man again. He will remain imprisoned for his remaining years, but, so far, he has seen the inside of Torra Prison for only a few days. It’s been over 15 months since Mubarak was summoned and detained.

Why would some Egyptians condemn mistreating Mubarak? Respecting the elderly is one reason; not stooping down to humiliating such a figure is another. It could also be because Egyptians are not bloodthirsty or viciously bitter by nature. From this perspective Egyptians have proven that they are truly different from other revolutionary nations.

After the fall of dictators and tyrants, their peoples usually react with a vengeance. Saddam Hussein was taunted as he was led to the gallows; after he hanged, rumour has it his head was decapitated, and he was stabbed several times. A video of the exact moment when his neck broke and the trap door opened was circulated around the world. Gaddafi died an even more ghastly death—discovered hiding in a sewage pipe, he was brutalized and savagely assaulted till he succumbed to his death.

Fortunately, Egypt’s ex-president did not suffer from any ill treatment. Quite the opposite, he was tried, and he received a strong sentence, yes, but he was neither made a laughing stock nor paraded around Cairo begging for mercy, and he was most definitely not abused. Many Egyptians would have considered such actions appalling and would never have yielded to atrocities.

And by the same token and due to the same characteristics, the Egyptian revolutionists remained peaceful all along. Not one bullet was shot and not one pistol was drawn to have Mubarak comply with the people’s demand. Other revolutions have turned bloody, but not the Egyptian one.
And even Mubarak himself avoided prolonging the agony and pain that people were suffering from and responded quickly to their demands by stepping down. It took only 18 days to have him end the ordeal. Compare this swift action to contain the turmoil to the choices Assad has taken—blood is being spilled on a daily basis in Syria 18 months after the Syrian uprising began. Only after making this comparison can Egyptians breathe a sigh of relief and appreciate their luck or better yet their nature.

It could be luck that has left Egypt with fewer bloody episodes than other nations calling for change, but it could also be that Egyptians refuse to resort to bloodshed and other means of self-destruction.

Some might disagree. Blood was spilled and lives were lost in Egypt in Maspero, Mohammed Mahmoud, Tahrir, and elsewhere. But it takes only a few seconds of contemplation to recognize how extremely peaceful the Egyptian revolution was if compared to other uprisings. This makes Egyptians very lucky.

When Egyptians become frustrated by mediocre results, when things don’t go their way, and when worry about the future presides, they only need to remember that their Egyptian ways have saved them from much agony and bloodshed. Only then will they appreciate the outcomes of their nonviolent revolution and their own nonviolent nature.

Soon after this post was written, Mubarak was transferred to Torra Prison indefinitely. And all appeals to move him to a hospital were rejected.
The younger generation, outspoken and ready to criticize, is focusing on another topic: the July 23 Revolution (1952) as compared to the January 25 Revolution (2011). The 60th anniversary of July 23rd is upon us; some dispute the revolution’s success and want to cancel the celebrations altogether; others claim the revolution as the most successful endeavor in Egypt’s modern history. It is important to pause and reflect.

Nasser and his officers were hailed as heroes back then—some still see them as such today. Nasser had noble and grand reforming ideas. By birth from the people, he was for them, too—a revelation in itself. He worked diligently for the masses, but in the process destroyed Egypt.

Nasser had aspirations; he wanted to lead a united Arab World, which is why Arabs from “the Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Gulf” worshipped him. He had the charisma and the presence, and he talked to the common Arabs even if it meant criticizing their own leaders.

While this unified Arab front was being created, Egyptians were losing theirs. They saw their flourishing country succumb to even deeper poverty and chaos. Sweeping decisions that at face value seemed
well intended eroded rather than built. The fruits of the catastrophic changes are reaped today.

The land reform initiative is a case in point. From the onset, it seemed like a dream come true for the helplessly poor peasants of Egypt. The core of land reform meant that the affluent but exploitive landowners handed the peasants a good portion of their land. Its intent was to abolish the monopoly of the rich and powerful and support the poor.

The results were calamitous. Instead of guiding and controlling the prosperous owners, Nasser opted to subdivide the Egyptian agricultural landscape into miniscule particles and hand these over to the peasants. Lack of financial means and knowledge on one hand and manipulative farmer cooperatives on the other led to the fall of Egypt’s agricultural empire.

Later in the 80s Sadat abolished the land reform laws, but the roots of decay manifested in social, cultural, and political implications remain today.

The land reform laws were demonstratively unsound. End result: Egyptians moved away from agriculture leaving their five feddans—now split amongst three generations of offspring—to literally rot. Egypt once exported its cotton, wheat, and onions to the world; there used to be a port in Alexandria to export only onions—gone. Now Egypt is the largest wheat importer in the world.

Other similar faulty measures slowly eroded Egypt’s wealth, economy, and political stability creating a different but not better Egypt. The Egyptian pound having been at par to its British counterpart slowly began to lose its buying power.

Soon Egyptians and non-Egyptians, some having lived in Egypt for centuries, began to leave to find work elsewhere. The non-Egyptians never returned; the Egyptians brought back radical and fundamental ideas from the Gulf and elsewhere.

Yes, education became free—again, an exemplary aim that proved unsuccessful. Universities packed students like sardines providing them with little incentive and not much knowledge. These students hardly
ever worked with the degrees they received, opting by necessity to drive cabs and work in stores. Education, at all levels, lost another battle.

Books, magazines, and any foreign ideas were curtailed, leaving Egypt crippled and stagnant. Most importantly, hope for a better future was never realized.

The worst repercussion from the former revolution was the fear that dominated people’s lives. In no other leader’s time did the majority of Egyptians live in such terror. The concept of free speech was non-existent in the media or amongst people; letters from abroad were opened regularly before arriving at their final destination, with the words “opened by the censor,” stamped on the opened envelope.

Egyptians became suspicious of one another, and the Big Brother mentality manipulated the streets. Windows were shut tight to avoid having neighbors listen to the ongoing disgruntlement. The “dawn visitors,” those who came to take their victims away at dawn, were infamous, their atrocities beyond any Egyptians have seen since.

This was Egypt then.

Today’s failings were not created in Mubarak’s time. Mubarak inherited the old ways, continued to use many of them, and failed to fix many others.

And here is Egypt now.

Those hailing the July 23 Revolution and Nasser as the savior must go back in history and learn the truth. Egypt will need 100 presidents, not one single Morsi, to fix the destruction created in Nasser’s time.

Morsi as president
Egyptians believe they know best

July 30, 2012

The liberals are adamant in their dislike and disdain of Morsi. They claim he will never be able to fulfill his promises. To them, Morsi is siding with SCAF, working for the Ikhwan, and betraying the revolution. He is a mere puppet figure handing over power to the Muslim Brotherhood. And his only few decisions are instantly attacked: why does he need to provide Palestinians with water and electricity when the Egyptians have neither?

The above is a mere fraction of the whiplash Morsi receives on an ongoing basis. In addition, his pious nature is also ridiculed. Does he think he can govern by praying at mosques five times a day? Does he have enough time to preside over the country’s needs? And why is he giving interviews in mosques and praying with all his visitors? And how is he going to entertain non-Muslim visitors? These are some of the wisecracks that many Egyptians are voicing.

From another perspective, Ikhwan followers are joyous and jubilant. They are endorsing their party and its successful candidate. They are also becoming arrogant and pushy. They too are extremely critical of their opponents and are aggressively promoting sharia and its guidelines.
Trying hard to glorify Morsi and his team, they are humbled by his religious outlook on matters and his visible tears as he prayed in Mecca.

All this is happening while the revolutionists are still seeking Mubarak’s defamation, his loot, and his downfall. They continue to hold him, SCAF, and the police force accountable. They blame him and SCAF for every fallout that takes place even today. Had he not brutalized the Ikhwan, maybe things would’ve been different. Had he focused on improving the state of informal settlements, fewer thugs would have emerged. And on it goes.

A newfound zeal for not only political knowledge but for exhibiting political wisdom is what many Egyptians show off today. Liberals, Mubarak’s followers, Ikhwan, Salafis—all believe they know best. All other Egyptians must accept their views, follow their course, and heed their warnings.

The minute a decree is announced, a ministerial position is filled, or a showdown of any sort occurs, everyone has an opinion.

And many are justified in most of their criticism. Morsi has yet to prove himself, and Mubarak remains the main culprit in the state Egypt faces today. Still, much more of what is being said is thoughtless slander.

Then there are the jokes. Egyptians are best known for their humour, and they are good at it. This is a proficiency no one can deny though it may be exploited today to slander someone. Social media is not making things better either. Egyptians now can yell to their hearts’ content without any hindrance or rebuttal. And on Facebook, the chain of jokes, hearsay, cartoons, and illogical comparisons defy rationality.


Egyptians have reached a stage of rift and division that may never heal. All the main issues and the challenges are yet to be resolved, and Egyptians are busy telling each other how to lead their lives—you see, each Egyptian believes he or she knows best. This is happening across the board. It doesn’t matter which party or group a person is affiliated with: everyone is knowledgeable and everyone else isn’t. Suddenly making others accept one’s view has become pivotal to all.

It is true that vigilance is extremely valuable. To remain aware will save Egyptians the hassle of demonstrating after an event becomes fait
accompli. It’ll also keep the political forces on course. Being watchful and observant does not mean becoming suspicious of everyone who doesn’t follow one’s view and resorting to bashing them.

Egyptians should accept where they are now. The revolution has taken them to this fork in the road.

Freedom is a difficult matter—appreciating and utilizing it wisely is a feat in itself.
President Morsi: what are you going to do about sectarian violence?

August 2, 2012

Giving President Morsi the benefit of the doubt was still an option here.

Collateral damage from the sectarian strife between Muslims and Copts in Dahshur, Giza, yields a death, dozens of injuries, burned homes and stores, a burglarized jewelry store, the eviction of 120 families, and agony and pain.

It is one of many incidents spiralling in number between Muslims and Copts since the revolution. In most of these occurrences, Copts end up dying, fleeing their livelihood and hometowns, having their churches torched, and suffering great injustices.

While repetition of similar confrontations is quite likely, for this isn’t the first conflict of its kind, Egyptian Copts and Muslims alike are flabbergasted.

Where is this going, President Morsi? And what are you doing about it? Remember: it is under your rule that these anguishes occurred. Shafik’s running for presidency was frowned upon because of the events that took place in Tahrir during his first few days as prime minister.
President Morsi, those in charge are accountable. Or do you personally consider Copts not very significant?

Complacency is not an option. It actually sets the course and tells radical Islamists it is ok to torch a Copt’s home and evict him from it; it confirms your approval of the abuse and harassment.

Unless you react; unless you come out and denounce in full force the happenings that have taken place, fanatic Islamists will consider it acceptable. Don’t do that! Go ahead; voice your disgust and call for justice.

Nasser, followed by Sadat, and later by Mubarak all concluded that radical Islamists, were basically reaching for power. It didn’t matter whom the Islamists took out along that road. In 1954, they tried to kill Nasser in Manshia, Alexandria, and they succeeded in killing Sadat in 1981. Then in 1995, in Addis Ababa, they orchestrated a similar attempt on Mubarak’s life, which he survived. Hence, Mubarak was extremely watchful, going after fundamentalists forcefully and vehemently, and jailing them.

In today’s Egypt no one should be judged for his beliefs; still, in today’s Egypt those who err should be detained, charged, and prosecuted if necessary. If they find it plausible to kill the president of Egypt, maim other Egyptians, and care very little for Egypt itself, they must be punished. Egyptian law is there to protect the peace and to protect all Egyptians.

President Morsi, the onus falls on you today. You need to come out and tell the Egyptians that treating other Egyptians with such disdain is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. Begin your presidency by setting certain guidelines that need to be followed and adhered to.

So, again, what are you going to do about it? How will you let Egyptians, fundamentalists in particular, realize that Copts are more Egyptian than anyone else. They have equal rights, Mr. President.

That is, unless these fanatics consider Egypt a mere stepping-stone towards another identity altogether. Unless they plan to first eliminate Copts; from there they move on to moderate Muslims—remember the Muslim engineer from Suez who was murdered in broad daylight for walking with his fiancée? Finally, they eradicate the Egyptian identity
altogether abolishing Egypt, as we know it, for it is a mere wrinkle in a wider and bigger empire. Don’t give them this chance.

This may be the first substantial incident since you have been elected. Unless you react, fundamentalists will have received the green light. But you see, this will never become the norm. Egyptians will never allow this to become the norm. Discrimination is not an option.

Outsiders are watching and get disgusted that Egyptians are treating other Egyptians in such a fashion. Why would anyone want to set foot in such an Egypt? If we are to have the world look at us as a civilized country, we need to behave in a civilized fashion. We need to address our internal issues with wisdom and speed.

President Morsi, we depend on you to react. Many Egyptians doubted your ability to rule fairly and without bias. Prove these Egyptians wrong, too. I personally am giving you the benefit of the doubt. Show Egyptians that you can unite this country towards safety. You can set the course.

Let’s hope that you take these humble words seriously and react in a presidential and non-biased fashion. Sectarian strife may end being the most dangerous portfolio facing you and the new government. Deal with it!

It is crucial that Egyptians are treated equally and with the same respect. Egyptians need you to play a pivotal role in leading this country towards peace and equality.

Many more sectarian strife incidents follow.
Can Egyptians be expected to give any more?

August 4, 2012

On January 20, 1961, during his inaugural address, JF Kennedy said his historical words, “Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country.” Today, the words of JFK are resonating for many Egyptians. Who gives first? Me or my country?

A few days back, after Egyptians and Cairenes, in particular, had suffered electric shortages throughout the blistering summer, President Mohamed Morsi asked Egyptians to be patient and encouraged them to ration their consumption of electricity. So far so good.

Morsi also suggested turning off power for a couple of hours, one in the morning and one in the evening. He guaranteed that if every Egyptian did that, enough electricity would be available to go round.31

Then he told his audience that this is what he did himself in his own home: switched off power for a couple of hours a day. Hmmm. Honestly?

Though Morsi’s intentions are honorable, I don’t think Egyptians will follow suit and turn electricity off when the temperature is 40 degrees and above. How can one convince Egyptians to sit in dark, sweltering homes for two hours a day even if it is for the good of the country?

Before President Morsi asks Egyptians to give, he should make sure that they are given something in return. Impoverished Egyptians are tired and exhausted. They have yet to reach that level of fortune: to be able to give. They have lived tough lives, and their circumstances are dire. Don’t expect these people to give without return, to give when they’ve been giving all along.

Before President Morsi asks for sacrifice, he needs to comprehend a few issues. First, one cannot ask the forlorn and the suffering to give unconditionally. You need to achieve the basics: shelter, food, love, etc., to be able to give. It is utterly unfair to expect someone to give while not receiving anything in return.

Second, disappointingly, I don’t believe President Morsi when he says he turns the lights off for two hours each day. And no Egyptian would believe it either. If the presidential palace is at a gridlock for two hours a day, then something is hugely wrong. And if President Morsi himself and his family find this acceptable, no Egyptian would find it so. They want a president who can work for them 24/7, not turn the lights off to save a few kilowatts.

Fair enough, President Morsi, say Egyptians condescend and turn off power for two hours a day. How long a wait is there before things get better? What are you doing to fix this perennial fiasco? As an Egyptian I’d be happy to help as long as you tell me there is an end in sight, but disappointingly none was mentioned.

Egypt needs a plan so that Egyptians don’t face yet another summer, or Ramadan for that matter, similar to this one. When one is expected to go up ten floors walking, when one is cooped up in an elevator for three hours, when an urgent surgery is stalled midway, when children can’t study, or elderly parents can’t breathe, it’s unreasonable to expect Egyptians to give.

Awareness campaigns are needed to assist simple Egyptians in understanding how to preserve water and electricity. Television is a great tool to reach a broad spectrum of Egyptians.

President Morsi might talk to Egyptians rationally. He needs to explain to them in a heart-to-heart speech, not one that is speedily shouted as one is leaving a mosque, the dilemma Egypt faces. Egypt
does not have enough power—period. We need to ration or the shortage will grow even further.

I don’t expect any Egyptian to take heed and comply. True, during the earlier days of the revolution, in Tahrir, one would have expected huge sacrifices from Egyptians, but I doubt if Egyptians are willing to give anymore.

But give Egyptians, and they will give back wholeheartedly and unreservedly.
The massacre of 16 Egyptian officers and soldiers who were sitting down to break their fast at dusk, at a checkpoint in Rafah, Sinai, is the most recent disaster to befall Egypt. All 23 squad members were targeted, and it is by accident that some were only injured. Afterwards, the assailants stole two vehicles and crossed into Israel where they were pursued and killed. An Egyptian official said, “Insurgents crossed into Egypt from the Gaza Strip before attacking the border station on Sunday. They then stole two vehicles and headed to nearby Israel, where they were eventually killed by Israeli fire.”

The reasons behind this carnage are unknown.

Sinai, even before the revolution, had seen its share of terrorism, with extremists turning it into a hotbed for their regular showdowns. In 2004 and 2005 bomb blasts targeted Sinai, in particular Sharm El Sheikh, Dahab, and Taba, and created mayhem in one of the most tranquil spots in Egypt.

One particular attack killed 88 Egyptians and tourists. The aim was to disrupt this vacation haven and destroy Sharm’s exceptional reputation, and in the process destroy an arm of the Egyptian economy that

yields billions of dollars. Still, why would anyone want to destroy Egypt’s economy? This seems incomprehensible.

Then, after the Revolution, the pipeline transporting natural gas to Israel was bombed over 15 times causing Egypt to halt its gas export to Israel. Here the already volatile Israeli-Egyptian relations were the target. Surprisingly, Tahrir protestors hailed these attacks unaware that ultimately the same perpetrators would slay Egyptian men.

Rafah, Areesh, and other towns close to the border with Gaza have seen many acts of terrorism. And many more skirmishes along the border with Israel occurred because those who hope ill for Egypt infiltrate Israel through Egypt causing the frail relationship between Israel and Egypt to strain even further.

Today, after the Rafah killings, Egyptians are again sensing betrayal and treachery. While furious at those who consider Egypt easy target, they cannot fathom the hatred behind such an attack. Déjà vu.

Hamas and the people of Gaza take much of the blame. The tunnels that have been used to smuggle goods into Gaza are the same ones that smuggle terrorism into Egypt. These tunnels have flourished and have remained disregarded, and they are the route by which assailants come into Sinai.

At the same time, some blame the Israelis, mainly because the smoldering Israeli conflict is an ever-present context across the entire Middle East, allowing Israelis to be convenient scapegoats for all ills.

The new president is also faulted. According to many, he should’ve heeded the Israeli warnings, and never sent his men into harm’s way without the appropriate preparedness, arms, and protection. Then after the carnage, President Morsi should have attended the slain men’s funeral to empathize with the families and all Egypt.

Another offender is Field Marshal Tantawi. He is the new Minister of Defense, and the man in charge; hence, he is blamed, and many argue he should be removed immediately.

But the Jihadist, be they Egyptians or Gazans, or a combination of both, remain the logical perpetrators. In all previous attacks in Sinai, they have been the instigators. For the past year “there has been growing
lawlessness in the vast desert expanse, as Bedouin bandits, extremists and Palestinian militant from next-door Gaza fill the vacuum.”

Sinai remains the cause of perpetual worry. Demilitarized since the Camp David Accord, it lacks in the necessary defense mechanism that guards it from infiltrators.

However, as with all disasters that befall Egypt, Rafah’s bloodbath will be forgotten as other disasters transpire—with no judgement, no closure, and no guilty party named, translating into more disgruntlement and protests.

As these incidents and their frequency intensify, Egyptians become terrified. They are fearful that Egypt may be losing its grip on Sinai, that ultimately militant extremists would turn Sinai into another Afghanistan, that Israel may be rejoicing as it pushes the Palestinians into Sinai, gaining Gaza and losing the worry, that the buying and selling of property in the peninsula would shift sovereignty to the Palestinians. Nothing has been proven, but much is coming down the pipes of hearsay.

Sinai is both troubled and troubling.

To date, no one in Egypt knows what really happened at the checkpoint in Rafah, Sinai. If Egyptians were told who the culprits were or who killed their men, then at least there would be closure—nothing. And this attitude is what aggravates Egyptians the most.

33 Yusri. See n.32
In the West, people go about their businesses relatively unconcerned about shows of skin or public affection. A couple may hug and kiss at a bus stop and no one flinches. No one gawks at someone wearing shorts or a tank top. What people wear, unless it is totally against decorum, is a non-issue. Dress codes do not exist, but they are voluntary and liberal.

The same westerners do a double flip when they see a woman wearing black from head to toe. They are shocked by the sight of a *niqab*. Why would anyone want to completely cover herself in this manner, they ask. Why can we not see this woman’s face?

While in Egypt and in most of the Islamic world, as well as in many traditional societies throughout the world, it is a given that women must cover themselves; even if they are not scarved, then at least they wear modest clothes of a certain length and a certain fit. They go by what are generally acceptable standards in their society. For many Muslim societies, this is the norm. Modesty defines their behaviour.

By the same token, these Muslims stare at what seems to them a semi-naked woman and don’t understand her. How could she be a righteous woman if she willingly exhibits her body in this manner?
My western tourist friend, a woman, is introduced to a museum guide who is Islamist. She extends her hand to shake his, not realizing that he will refuse. He looks at the floor, hand at his side. She is outraged at this rejection of personhood incurred because she is a female. She says nothing, but makes a mental note that Islam discriminates against women.

The two worlds—the Islamic one and the Western one—are so far apart and so completely unaware of how the other functions that both tend to exhibit fears whether they are Islamophobic or xenophobic ones.

The issue today is the apprehension with which many Westerners regard the Muslim world. The question is whether such apprehension is justified.

First, we need to differentiate between Muslims and Islamists. Muslims are those who follow Islam; Islamists take it further; they want the world to be Islamic and want Islam to become the dominant, if not the only, power in the world. The West has every right to worry about Islamists, but not about Muslims.

Then radical Islamists around the world haven’t been presenting a good image of themselves. Events only in the last week or so exemplify this. In Kaduna, Nigeria, a radical Islamist group claims its responsibility for a suicide attack that left 21 people dead.34 In Libya, an unscarved woman is asked to leave an official event because she offended the Islamists.35 And in Egypt 120 Coptic families have been exiled from their town after radical Islamists took the law into their own hands.

Notorious incidents are many. If one focuses on Egypt, a chain of events from deaths to arson to evictions proves the point that Islamists are causing a lot of fear. Egyptians worry that, with the Ikhwan in power, rigid Islamists would reduce exposure to the outside world, curtail culture and art in all forms, restrict women’s movement and appearance in public, prohibit personal freedom as in the availability of

alcohol or choice of dress code, fine those who don’t fast Ramadan, and much more.

Copts, liberals, and Muslims alike are all fearful. If everyone other than the Islamists, aka Salafis and Ikhwan, is worried, how could one blame the westerners for being so?

At least Egyptians have had some exposure down the years to the Islamists’ ways; they have seen women in complete black and men in unkempt beards and short galabiyas all along, but to westerners this is totally new and raises not only their concerns but also their fears.

So a pivotal question arises—are westerners justified in their fear of Islam? Well, yes and no. As much as Egyptians and other moderate countries fear the impending arrival of fundamentalists, westerners should be similarly worried. Islamists do not give heed to anyone standing in the way of their claim to rights and dominance, but Muslims are not extremists.

In addition, news travels fast today. A tweet reaches the guy next door as fast as it reaches someone across the ocean. When Egyptians exhibit signs of fear of the fundamentalists in Egypt, the world listens. Furthermore, people don’t post on Facebook with Egyptians or westerners in mind. They simply post, and their disgust at events resonates around the world. It is justifiable for westerners to be wary of Islamists, too.

But at the same time, these radical Islamists comprise a miniscule percentage of the Muslims around the world and in particular those in western countries. The absolute majority of Muslims are law-abiding citizens, those in the West enjoying the democratic life that they chose to live in the western world and the opportunities available to them.

Muslims are similar to any other group of people be it Christians, Jews, or any other sect. They have their good and their bad. Not all Muslims, Christians, or Jews are perfect. However, to generalize and assume that all Muslims fall under the category of fanatic or radical Islamist is unfair bias. Moreover, it shows profound ignorance of cultural difference and what this means, of contemporary global politics, and of the essential tenets of the Koranic belief system called Islam. In
today’s world, global citizenship means learning some basic facts about world religions—all of them.

Because some Muslim women choose to wear the headscarves, they stand out. But the headscarf issue, as trivial as it is, hinders people from seeing Muslims for what they really are. Muslims love life, enjoy culture and art, work diligently and professionally, and laugh to their hearts’ content, like anyone else. Does it really matter what headgear—or body garments—they put on? Is it very different from Western women sporting spiky shoes that ruin their feet, or teenaged boys wearing hoodies and baseball caps, or men wearing that hallmark of completely useless business attire The Tie? The fact is that Egyptians, who are mainly Muslims want, as do most Westerners, the best for all people, and they want to live in peace.

To Muslims around the world—continue to be yourselves and prove to the world that you are virtuous citizens. Only then can you promote Islam.
Egypt is in dire need of borrowed money to stabilize its economy and save itself from an economic debacle. Since borrowing through the regular monetary establishments goes against the Islamic tradition, all Islamic parties and factions denounce it. Yes, Islamic banks exist, and have a different set of procedures altogether, but they are only a handful and do not have the liquidity or surplus to provide several billion dollar loans to Egypt.

Morsi comes to power and inherits the current shortage. He then does what any other president would have done, Islamic or otherwise—borrows.

The Muslim Brotherhood is in a conundrum. They are stymied: one of them—in fact, the one they chose to preside over Egypt—goes against the Islamic norm and receives loans to be paid off with hefty interest rates. They quietly and casually approve the action. It seems as though Morsi, and in turn the Muslim Brotherhood, will have to accept regular lending procedures. Is it change in strategy or acceptance of realities?

The Freedom and Justice Party, aka the Muslim Brotherhood, has always had a clear stance against Israel. It would back Hamas any
Morsi as president

day, has always proclaimed Israel as the enemy, and has supported the Palestinians in more ways than one.

But when Morsi became president, he had to set aside his own inclinations, as diplomacy forced him to send and receive correspondence to and from Israel. More importantly, Morsi has to treat Israel as a bordering country with mutual challenges and with whom Egypt has diplomatic relations and agreements.

Then fanatics killed 16 Egyptian soldiers along the Israeli border with Egypt. Morsi closed the Rafah Crossing, bombed the tunnels, and went after the culprits be they Palestinians or Egyptians. Allegiances and loyalties may change when one comes to power.

Morsi will be visiting the US on September 23 to address the United Nations. International diplomacy warrants such trips. From a different perspective, this official visit will entail meeting officials of the other gender, maybe visiting the White House, having no mosque in close proximity, and abiding to timelines that don’t take prayer into account. Morsi will again have to handle all this in a diplomatic and presidential manner.

In addition, on other official visits if not this one, protocol requires the president’s wife to partake in such events. And vice versa, the president’s wife should be there to meet the wives of visiting dignitaries if not the dignitaries themselves. We don’t know how Mrs. Morsi will react; will she avoid such gatherings altogether or show up and participate?

If she prefers to stay away from the limelight, will she be complementing her husband’s role and fulfilling hers? Then if she participates in hosting official figures and their spouses, will she be safe from the wrath of fundamentalists?

One conundrum after another will face the new president. Diplomacy, leadership, governance, and monetary needs may force Morsi to behave in a fashion that may sometimes go totally against what the Islamists hold sacred.

If it were up to rigid fundamentalists, Egypt would be cuffed and chained by prohibitive Islamic measures. But it remains unknown how far on this extreme path is Morsi willing to go. From the outset, Morsi has been extremely religious: he makes time to pray on time and in a
mosque even for *fajr* (sunrise) prayer; he leads prayers on occasions; he appears truly moved in the presence of God in Mecca, and he seems to have finalized the debate over his wife’s role temporarily: she will have no role.

Morsi has been put on the spot. The position of leading man in Egypt sometimes may entail either conforming to Islam’s guidelines or dealing with matters in a realistic fashion. It will be interesting to see how this president handles himself in the future.

In the meantime, Egypt has no guidelines or constitution to follow. In today’s Egypt nothing is standard or ordinary. Quite the contrary, major upheavals occur weekly. Only the future will tell which route Morsi will take.
Creating tyrants—the Egyptian way
August 30, 2012

As the years went by, Mubarak’s photographs were mounted on every wall in every civil service office. The photographs grew larger and larger until they became double the size of Mubarak himself. As he drove on Cairo’s congested streets, his motorcade stopped and jammed traffic for hours. He also had his own batch of auspicious names: the pious leader, the virtuous father, and so on. Then, his name was engraved on the most prominent underground metro station, on the prestigious police academy, and on hundreds of schools and institutions.

Suzanne Mubarak got the same treatment, and she became Egypt’s First Lady, Mama Suzanne, and El Hanem, (equivalent to Ma’am or Lady) and her name, with its various titles, adorned several organizations and associations. Suzanne’s photograph also appeared on every volume of Reading for Everybody, her effort to reach the poor with books and publications.

Several years ago, during the African Cup, while Egypt hosted, played, and won the final match against the Cameroons, the camera zoomed in on Alaa and Gamal Mubarak, the president’s sons, every two minutes or so to capture their glee and cheering. On other occasions,
before Gamal had become a key political player, TV channels focused on him in summits and conferences for no particular reason.

It doesn’t seem feasible that the Mubaraks would have asked for such treatment, but it seems they didn’t think badly of it. They must have enjoyed it, and in the long run, they must have grown accustomed to it and expected it.

From this perspective, Egyptians have actually played a role in creating the tyrants, the Mubaraks. It is something that Egyptians do well—put someone high on the pedestal and turn him into a tyrant.

Today, as President Morsi arrived home after his short but seemingly positive trip to China and Iran, he was met by hundreds of people who were there to cheer him. An entourage of supporters met him around his home, and others blocked the Merghani Street in Heliopolis, where the presidential palace is, and the Airport Road.

Was the visit so vital and so important that Egyptians needed to confront the traffic and noise, leave the comfort of their homes, and ignore their daily obligations to meet the president upon his arrival? I don’t believe that any president had received such a warm welcome after a nondescript but official visit. Even when Sadat visited Jerusalem, a defining day in Egypt’s history, one does not recollect such a celebration.

At dawn, on the first day of Eid, Morsi’s convoy of 17 motorcycles and black Mercedes cars arrived at Amr Ibn El As Mosque—I counted them. The sight was disturbing and reminiscent of another president.

Simultaneously, most worshippers were prohibited from praying at the mosque to make room for Morsi’s guards and team, a circumstance that left those there to enjoy Eid prayer disgruntled and dissatisfied. Is Morsi aware of the sour taste that his motorcade and entourage left in people’s mouths? Does he approve or is he misguided into following what those surrounding him say?

Morsi seems to still enjoy living in his rented apartment in the suburbs of Cairo; he has yet to move into one of the palaces—no one can deny that the man is modest, at this point, in his expectations. Still, his followers, civil servants, security forces, and many Egyptians in general are not giving him the chance to function as an ordinary Egyptian. They are trying to make an idol out of him.
Morsi as president

Then Morsi’s supporters, be they imams, religious leaders, fatwa callers, or mere members of the Freedom and Justice Party, are glorifying Morsi and elevating him to the level of a khalif or as a descendent of Abou Bakr or Omar Ibn El Khattab, Prophet Mohammed’s descendants.

Morsi has neither told them to do so nor has he expected them to place him on par with such distinguished Muslims. Still, he won’t mind, and in the long run, he will accept and expect. No man is infallible.

Are Egyptians the creators of tyrants?

We do seem as though we love to create them. We love or hate, and when we love, we go all the way. Even if we don’t love, but happen to be civil servants of any level, we try our best to make that leader a god.

In all fairness and in spite of how sometimes I’m against the overly outspoken activists, I find the role of protestors, demonstrators, citizen journalists, and social media followers fundamental in enlightening Morsi and keeping him aware of how the rest of Egypt thinks of such ways.

President Morsi, beware of your close protectors. They may be guiding you towards the path of tyranny.
Thousands of miles away, in the Province of British Columbia, Canada, dozens of islands, though geographically very close, remain distanced from one another. Vancouver, the largest city in the province is about 40 km from the capital, Victoria. To get to one from the other, you take a ferry trip that lasts around an hour and thirty minutes; in addition to lining up, embarking, and disembarking, the trip takes over two hours and thirty minutes—if the two cities were to be connected by a bridge, thirty minutes would suffice. You would think that the inhabitants of these islands and the cities in the proximity would be delighted by the idea of a bridge to get them closer to one another and make islands and other cities alike reachable? No, not so.

Though bridges would make travelling amongst island destinations cheaper and facilitate access to medical systems and schools, people in British Columbia, Canada, prefer to remain apart and distinctly separated. They believe that such bridges would bring an overflow of tourists, noisy campers, and unkempt city dwellers. These visitors would invade their pristine and immaculate havens, and leave their footprints and rubbish everywhere.
To British Columbians, and many other wise thinkers, it is better to keep people, distances, and identities apart.

Here in Egypt a discussion has ensued around building a bridge between Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Both might gain from the easy access. Only 10-km long, the bridge would bring easy travel, shorter distances, accessibility, and speed. Trade would flourish, and exporting and importing would definitely benefit both countries if not other countries in the vicinity. And Egyptian pilgrims would travel the short distance by car—no ferries or planes would be necessary, reducing the cost of pilgrimage tremendously.

However, as there are positive factors, there are many negative ones. A bridge would also simplify access to opposite cultures, different attitudes, and contrary ideologies, and change both countries as we know them.

The illegal tunnels built under the Egyptian and the Palestinian border are a case in point. Food and necessities are smuggled in through these tunnels. But while this is the case for exports from Egypt, ideologies, causes, and weapons are brought into Egypt through the tunnels.

Furthermore, during the first few days of the Egyptian revolution and via a tunnel, escaped prisoners managed to quickly flee back to Gaza and soon became free citizens in Gaza. In addition, stolen Egyptian cars are sold in Gaza on an ongoing basis, as are smuggled butane gas cylinders.

Illegal tunnels may not equate to a perfectly legal bridge that will be secured and protected. However, a bridge between Egypt and Saudi Arabia would expose both countries to the other world that lies across the bridge. New guidelines, invasive ideologies, and peculiar measures would become available, so easily available that they could affect the foundation of both countries.

Saudi Arabia has its own ways, as does Egypt. Saudi Arabia remains a closed country, a monarchy with strict moral and political expectations. Sharia is adhered to, and in proven cases, thieves have their hands cut off, and women are stoned. Alcohol is prohibited. And it is only in 2011 that women have been allowed to vote; they still have very
few rights since they need a guardian to travel and pursue life as lived by Egyptians.

Egyptians have always led far more open lives. Women have travelled alone, pursued careers, enjoyed driving, and suffered no ill consequences from all this. Alcohol is allowed. The two countries are significantly different, and easy access may shake the essence of both.

Another drawback to the bridge is that it would supposedly be built from Tabuk in Saudi to Sharm el Sheikh in Egypt. Sharm remains one of the most touristic areas in Egypt, and it brings in billions of dollars. Tourists visit Sharm with expectations: to mingle together free of inhibition, to wear skimpy clothes and not be gawked at, and to drink and be merry. And Egyptians would like Sharm to remain as is.

A bridge could entail an influx of Saudi tourists that would destroy the culture existing in Sharm el Sheikh. It would also be disappointing if officials begin to cater for the needs of Saudis, prohibiting, say, sunbathing or alcohol. This would restrict from the enjoyment of the thousands and thousands of European tourists who enjoy the freedom available in Sharm.

By bringing Egypt and Saudi Arabia closer, something will have to give. Neither Egypt nor Saudi Arabia wants to adopt the ways of the other. Egypt has its own laws and guidelines, and Saudi Arabia has its—bringing them closer will be disconcerting.

Egyptians and Saudis should look carefully at the long-term effect of such a bridge.
Rewriting Egypt’s constitution the Islamic way

Too much, too fast

September 6, 2012

In many developed countries, after a president is elected, he counts on his loyal supporters, those who worked on his campaign, to launch his first government and found his cabinet. This also takes place because this campaign team believes in the president’s platform and goals. This is a given. Why hire those who oppose me? Furthermore, it is a token of appreciation for the effort of such loyalists—they may even have been promised prestigious posts earlier on.

This occurs in many republics around the world, and it is indeed happening in Egypt now. President Morsi has surrounded himself with a dedicated and approving group. And via the chosen cabinet, various councils, newly appointed governors and army leaders, and media top heads, Morsi has affirmed his power. After he assigned and reshuffled positions, the outcome is clear: the majority of all prestigious positions have been filled by Islamists, mostly Freedom and Justice Party members (aka Ikhwan) and some El Nour Party members (aka Salafis).
Although payback time by those newly elected is universally acknowledged, in Egypt, and after Morsi alluded to equal rights to all Egyptians, these implementations are quite alarming because they refute election promises and are happening too fast. And moderate and liberal Egyptians are horrified by the change in attitude and speed by which the change is taking place.

With fastidious and determined measures, President Morsi eliminated Field Marshall Tantawi and Anaan, his second man; appointed new military top heads; and gained the allegiance of the army. He had the Shura Council, Egypt’s upper House of Parliament, appoint a new Supreme Press Council and a new Human Rights Council. Ten new governors have been appointed, too. The next fundamental change will be the Supreme Court, to be announced any day. Again, the big share of all these positions has gone to Islamists, Ikhwan, and FJP members.

Liberals are puzzled. It took Mubarak decades to dominate Egypt; Morsi is doing it with cutthroat speed.

But what did these liberal Egyptians think? This was an expected result to Morsi’s success. When they chose Morsi, instead of Shafik, they should have known the consequences.

So, how can moderate and liberal Egyptians handle all this? How can they still have a presence in today’s Egypt? Or will they give up on Egypt altogether and take the first flight to the first country to accept them as immigrants? Then how can the Egyptians who won’t flee hope to enjoy a moderate Egypt—an Egypt that remains open to the world, has equal rights for men and women, and encourage creativity in all aspects of life?

First, such Egyptians must accept Morsi’s presence. He is here for his term—four years—unless some major jurisdictional event takes place. In a democracy, the people accept the vote results. Now these Egyptians need to move on and go about the business of protecting Egypt not by hoping that Morsi disappears because he won’t, but by playing a true role in keeping moderate Egypt alive.

In spite of accepting the reality—President Morsi is here to stay—moderate Egyptians must remain vigilant. If Morsi wants to rule without any accountability, they must prove him wrong and continue
to speak loud and clear when he errs. Social media, media, protesting and demonstrating remain the weapons to stand in the way of Islamizing Egypt and to obstruct the free reign policy that Morsi may opt to adopt.

Thirdly, liberal Egyptians must unite forces against Islamic dominance. During the presidential election, the country seemed divided on itself. Today, all moderate powers need to consolidate their efforts under one body. Baradei’s Constitution Party sounds great, but it won’t be if it remains one of many. Liberals need to ignore differences amongst themselves and create a strong and forcible power that can stand against the Islamists.

Finally, moderate Egyptians need to reach out to all other Egyptians beyond those they are acquainted with through the digital world. Social media is great but drastically contained. They need to reach Egyptians everywhere. These Egyptians can be found in factories, on the street, at cafes waiting for the odd job, in the fields, and in small stores and kiosks across Egypt. Sitting in one’s cubicle and talking via a laptop is devoid of any communication with those in need of conviction—the modest, the uneducated, and the easily persuaded. This is not an easy task, but it is doable.

I am betting on moderate Egyptians trumping. They do have a true cause and have the determination in them to achieve their goals.
Egyptians, choose your battles

September 9, 2012

The Super football match launching the new football season was played today nine months after the Port Said massacre when 74 Ahly Ultras fans, young men in their teens and twenties, were brutally killed. No verdict has yet been announced in the case. However, matches had been put on hold in honour of the fallen. Egyptians were so devastated they didn’t want to watch football, and many construed watching a football match as a betrayal to those slain.

The Ahly Ultras, in particular, were against reinstating the matches until a judgment is issued against those who murdered their comrades. They insisted they would stop this particular match between Ahly and Enbi. With foreboding anxiety, Egyptians watched. Would this confrontation cause another massacre? Are young men so ready to give up their lives?

The Ultras traveled to Alexandria where the match was to take place, and there blocked the entrance to the hotel where the players were staying. When bus drivers refused to take them to the stadium, they decided to walk to Borg El Arab—a good 40 Km. Simultaneously, those who hadn’t travelled to Alexandria congregated on Mohamed Mahmoud Street in the vicinity of the Ministry of Interior in Cairo.
Rewriting Egypt’s constitution the Islamic way

The Ultras remained defiant ready to die for their cause, egged on by the tweeters and other prominent speakers. The officials were adamant, too, that the match proceeds as planned.

In the end, the match did indeed take place. The players were taken in secrecy from the hotel and rushed to the secured stadium, and they went ahead with the game. The match was delayed an hour, but it is being played as I write this post. Needless to say, the general atmosphere is not conducive to a good competitive match; no spectators were allowed in the stadium, but the game went on nonetheless.

This is one of the few times that protestors demand a change, rightfully or wrongfully, with which officials refuse to comply.

The institutions governing Egypt since the revolution—SCAF, the governments, the police force, or officials in general—have not been able to handle the protests. Intimidated and worried they would cause more harm than not, they had always given in to protestor’s demands. Many of the ultimatums set by protestors were valid, but many others weren’t; disappointingly, it became the norm to expect to achieve the best and speediest results by protesting, demonstrating, and striking.

This time it didn’t work out that way, and it seems that officials were not intimidated enough. The government has now set a precedent. The message is that protesting may not get you what you want after all. And many Egyptians agree with this outcome. As much as Egyptians are devastated over the Port Said massacre, many realize that better ways exist to achieve results than protesting and disputing.

Egyptians must choose their battles wisely. So much needs to be changed in Egypt, but if we draw the country to a standstill for every personal wrong, it will reach gridlock. Public bus drivers, teachers, flight attendants, and union workers are a mere few of those who have at times put the country at a standstill. They have stood on rails, closed airports, disrupted classes, and defied systems. It seems very self-centered to bring the country to a halt every time someone is dissatisfied. Resorting to disruption is abusive.

Extremes don’t end there. Families of criminals demand their discharge; others attack the judges if they don’t like the verdict. And radical
Muslims vow to cut water and electricity if the Coptic governor is not removed—all cases where fairness is abused and justice is smeared.

Protesting remains the only way we can remain loyal to the Revolution, stay vigilant against atrocities, and show that we care enough to create change.

However, there are battles and battles. Egyptians must prioritize. If Sinai becomes a hotbed for Islamists or is about to be taken over, we fight; if the Ikhwan force all women to wear the hijab against their wish, we protest; if communication is censored or freedom of speech is curtailed, we go to Tahrir. Still, we cannot protest against all causes, in spite of them being minor, personal, or debilitating to others.

Before Egyptians mistake lawlessness for freedom, before the state loses the respect of its people altogether, before every Egyptian circumvents the law and goes after the wrongdoers personally, Egyptians must choose their battles wisely.

The verdict in the Port Said massacre case will be pronounced on January 26, 2013. Around 75 offenders are being tried.
I grew up in an era when Egyptian ambassadors were usually retired army officers, sacked from the army and still compensated by being assigned to ambassadors’ posts. These men were often clueless as far as diplomacy and protocol were concerned. His Excellency, the guest of honour, sat at events, hardly opened his mouth or mingled but remained aloof and distant. Simultaneously, the embassy was managed like a bureaucratic Egyptian office, the consulate tedious and maddening.

So when I was told that the Egyptian ambassador to Canada was making a visit to the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, British Columbia, I was, at first, reluctant to attend. However, because I truly wanted to know his views on the current situation in Egypt, I went. I was pleasantly surprised.

Ambassador Wael Aboul Magd arrived on time, shook hands with and introduced himself by name to all attendees standing close by, was well dressed, and seemed down to earth and cordial. He also spoke the English language fluently and eloquently, so eloquently that he was never short of words or stammered to find a phrase. He was also well informed, candid, responsive and persuasive all in one.
But most of all, the ambassador had an encouraging demeanor about him. He remained positive even when he was talking about the challenges befalling Egypt. He was also genuinely keen on promoting Egypt—no fake diplomacy here; he sees a bright future and encourages Egyptians abroad to play a role in that future.

Ambassador Aboul Magd’s topic was “The Democratic Transition in Egypt.” He discussed the revolution’s achievements, the existing myths, and the challenges facing Egypt. His talk was followed by an array of questions from the attendees.

He started off by underlining the revolution’s success, a momentous event in the history of Egypt. He challenged the naysayers who argue that the revolution has not achieved anything and who say that things were better under the old regime. He did this by citing the direct results from the revolution; namely, the heightened level of accountability of the current—and any future—president of Egypt; the fact that the rampant corruption, which existed previously, has been curtailed; the end of the impunity enjoyed by the police in dealing with citizens; and the settling of the relations between the first democratically elected civilian president and the military.

The two myths he focused on were, one, Islamizing Egypt, and two, the annulment of the Camp David Agreement. He refuted both myths giving valid and convincing explanations of why such myths would not be realities.

He also acknowledged the numerous challenges, which continue to confront Egypt’s transition. Some of the conceptual challenges include the urgent need to define the role of religion in public life, combating the rampant absolutism in public discourse; the need to broaden public discourse away from “my choice is the best attitude,” which has deepened the rift among the political players and among Egyptians, too; and the need to address the creeping cynicism in Egyptian youth, who once again are starting to assume their efforts may be wasted and their lives are without meaning.

Among the more tangible challenges and most pressing challenges, he alluded to the economic ones: lack of foreign direct investment, and drop in tourism; and the security challenge—increased lawlessness and
disregard of the law, as well as the lack of preparedness and training of the police itself.

Then the ambassador took questions from the floor. He eradicated the worries of the two Israeli attendees without once belittling from the Palestinian cause or Egypt’s rights. At the end, the Israeli woman who fumbled in choosing her words without coming across as disrespectful, followed the ambassador outside, walked up to him, shook his hand, and told him how much she enjoyed his talk and was encouraged by his explanations.

Two Egyptian Canadian students expressed their worry over women and Coptic rights; he was clear that these areas, too, needed extensive work, but I believe by the end of his response he had managed to encourage them both to return to Egypt and work hard on improving women’s status there.

As much as I was gratified throughout the talk, I grappled with one aspect. Though this should have been a win-win situation, I don’t think Egyptians, in general, or UBC students, in particular, got enough out of it. The event was not publicized or promoted well, and the venue was inappropriate; I’d have liked to see hundreds of political science, journalism, and communication students enjoy the ambassador’s lecture—he would’ve gained their approval ever so quickly. Both Egypt and UBC students would have gained.

I’m blogging about the ambassador’s visit to UBC because he solidified a new impression: not all Egyptian government officials are bureaucrats, nonchalant and not caring, but in fact many are passionate about promoting Egypt. I came out of the talk believing in the role that a government official can play once more.

I’m sure many similar officials exist, but it is always good to give credit where credit is due. Thank you Ambassador Aboul Magd for returning my trust. Thank you for making me see a better tomorrow for Egypt.
Politically savvy Egyptians: good or bad?

September 20, 2012

Prior to the Revolution, Egyptians loved to talk politics; they chattered away as though they knew a heck of a lot about the political arena. Egyptians enjoyed complaining about what could have been and criticizing what was lacking, and, in the process, often gulped in made up stories that spread like wild fire—that’s all not new. However, the new Egyptian, the Egyptian of today, is politically astute. Today’s Egyptian is perceptive and aware of the crippling sociopolitical hurdles: the constitution, the various parties, the rules and regulations, and the electoral system.

My favourite conversations remain the ones I have with taxi drivers because they represent Egyptians from all walks of life. Today’s 8:00 a.m. conversation was with a young man who had finished the graveyard shift at Cairo International Airport, but, having completed his night job, was ready to pursue his second but daytime job. He vented: how the last two years have destroyed the economy, how Egyptians have come to hate each other and quibble and wrangle over everything, and how the pillars of the society, be they the Ikhwan, the president, or the opposition leaders are all after their own glory.
Egyptians used to watch soap operas most nights, then a few years back, the regime tolerated open forums on critical and sacrilegious issues. Egyptians became more outspoken, and talk shows stirred once-taboo discourse. “Let them enjoy themselves,” was what Mubarak had said, according to hearsay, totally unaware of the consequences. Still, none of us can deny this change; during the last few years of Mubarak’s era, control over the spoken and written word had fallen by the wayside.

And with the arrival of the revolution came the heyday of talk shows. Soap operas remained on the back burner, and Egyptians became avid watchers of political dialogue: the politically savvy Egyptian has arrived.

In the earlier months of the revolution, the discourse revolved around how perfect the revolution was, the discussion remaining superficial. All programs hailed the revolution and sung its achievements. Today’s dialogue, however, is serious and analytical.

Suddenly everyone became a politician. Mention the election campaigns, and someone readily springs into a long-winded explanation of list-based candidacy versus single-winner-based candidacy. What, you say? Open the factional dispute, and they’ll discuss Wahabis, Sufis, socialists, communists, Nasserists, and Nazists. Talk about trials, and judgmental folks will elaborate on the spirit and core of Egyptian law and sharia.

In essence, the deliberations and arguments are becoming more important than the issue itself. Guests on talk shows are lawyers, politicians, activists, and journalists—all so aware and so informed. But the haggling over who is right, which approach to take, where all this is leading Egypt is overwhelming for ordinary Egyptians, many unable to fathom much sense from it.

Some of the sweeping recommendations are prohibitively costly, others politically unwise, and many personally biased. Simultaneously, the ordinary Egyptian is wondering why he should accept one opinion if not the other? Egyptians are all talking simultaneously to the extent that they can hardly hear one another and are not able to see the right from the wrong.

In the next few months, Egyptians will be making fundamental choices via a constitution referendum and parliamentary elections; as
a definite consequence, more rumblings, more social unrest, and even more fear mongering will occur.

Be savvy politicians, I tell Egyptians; analyze and assess, but in this process, remain rational and democratic, and more importantly, unite Egypt toward a good tomorrow.
The production of a 14-minute trailer humiliating Prophet Mohammed has instigated a pandemonium worldwide. Due to our inability to understand one another, the world is raging.

As far as freedom and free speech are concerned, the West believes it knows best, and the world should go by its rules and standards. The Muslims around the world, on the other hand, are steadfast in holding their pride and dignity above anything else and in the process demean themselves into spiteful rage.

So shaming is in order. The first to shame are those who made the movie ridiculing prophet Mohammed without thinking of the consequences. Shame, too, on those who posted it on September 11 to incite Muslims into flaring up on that day in particular. They succeeded in their aim: to purposefully inflame a mob-like response validating Muslim barbarity, so as to provoke the disgust of the West.

From the Muslim perspective, Prophet Mohammed is a sacred, not-to-be-depicted icon. To most Muslims, Prophet Mohammed’s figure should never be reproduced in any shape or form, let alone made fun of. Even at my age, I have yet to see a single portrait of Prophet Mohammed. It may be hard for the western world to envisage such
respect—even though many Christians believe it sacrilegious to try to depict God, though not Jesus. So the West has to understand this mentality or bear the resulting rage and consequential hatred.

And before we consider the arguments for free speech in this case, it’s useful to consider free speech as it relates to hate laws in the West. Does the West not refute hateful expressions such as “Jews should be wiped off the face of the earth,” “the holocaust did not happen,” or words belittling the 9/11 tragedy? Does it not find these thoughts repulsive and in some jurisdictions, illegal and actionable?

If so, then the West must understand that belittling Prophet Mohammed is of equal seriousness to Muslims. We should not consider it a violation of freedom of speech to accept a standard of global decorum that prohibits disgracing the sacred. This is hate speech.

While we are in shaming mode, we must shame the Muslims, too: the Benghazians who killed an innocent man, the US ambassador, an avid supporter of the Libyan cause; and the Egyptians who couldn’t curtail their anger and attacked the American Embassy when an embassy is sacred soil.

Then shame on those Muslims who resorted to burning homes and attacking stores of Christians around the world. And shame on the silly Egyptian Muslim who took out his anger on the Bible and burned it—as if that did any good.

These fervent but blinded Muslims are no better than the Americans who killed Muslims or vandalized mosques after September 11. And the silly Egyptian is no better than Terry Jones, who burned the Koran.

More shame in this vicious cycle goes to the French cartoonist and his magazine, Charles Hebdo, who decided to fan the flames of anger even further as if the existing rage was not enough. To him, it was neither here nor there that people were dying. He ignored the wrath around the world and decided to publish more demeaning depictions of the Prophet as though the world wasn’t already brimful of anger.

With a publicity stunt like this one, he may have gained some fame. Lampoonists may believe the world is their stage—certainly in France, the attitude seems to be that there are no limits to satirical content. But the world is not France.
While a free France where anyone can be ridiculed may be a good thing, to millions the cartoonist has committed a truly incomprehensible act of disrespect, and in the process he may have endangered French abroad, too. In anticipation of reactionary attacks, the French have decided to close off their embassies, schools, and centres in 20 countries around the world.

So, Mr. Cartoonist, accept the consequences of your behaviour. These simple Muslims may be enraged but it is the only way they can react. These Muslims on the streets of Cairo, Kabul, or Teheran have neither the skills, nor the eloquence, or calm nature that allows them to treat this animosity in any other way.

Now that I have shamed half the world, what remains to be said? Vindictive acts create hatred and result in severe repercussions, so we need to respect one another, avoid blind thoughtlessness, and be aware of the consequences of our actions.

Allah, God, and every other God known to mankind, be with us in these trying times.
Manal El Tibi, one of the few women partaking in the Constituent Assembly, tasked with writing the Egyptian Constitution, resigned on September 24. She created a stir within the assembly and amongst Egyptians. The reasons behind her resignation were clear; she sees no hope in playing any role amidst a radically Islamic assembly that cannot contradict the precepts of Islamic law, leaving absolutely no room for fair negotiations.

This is one of hundreds of events that have taken place in the last few months exhibiting the friction between the two factions in Egypt today: the moderates and the Islamists.

On the one side, moderate Egyptians find the discourse in the assembly and elsewhere degrading. The disputes are on topics not remotely close to the real challenges confronting Egypt. To moderates, bizarre notions, such as the age at which girls can marry or women’s rights in an Islamic society, have brought Egypt to an unprecedented low. On the other hand, Islamists remain ruthless in their pursuit of what they consider Islamic and “holy.” The end result is that Egypt is now defined via two starkly different lenses: the Islamist and the moderate.
With the ousting of Mubarak, then the ‘yay’ constitution referendum vote, the Islamists began to hold their heads high and gain ground. Then Morsi became president, and he removed Field Marshal Tantawy and his assistant Anaan, transcending any fears amongst the Islamists. Now Islamists speak confidently and boldly regardless of how insane their propositions are.

Those airing Islamic doctrine and guidelines are in abundance: Islamic party members, sheikhs, *fatwa* deliverers, religious channel spokespersons, and social media followers.

Simultaneously the moderates, unable to fathom the change, remain stumped in total bewilderment, flailing haphazardly at what they, and most logical human beings, would call hallucination and utter nonsense. They neither have the ability to intervene nor the capacity to change the tidal wave battering Islamic Egypt.

The gap in the Egyptian divide is so huge that clearly there is no room for reconciliation. No, Islamists and moderate Egyptians are so far apart that a compromise cannot exist. A bombshell is the best synonym to describe this realization.

So where does Egypt go from here? The impending future seems treacherous, a chasm of divided ways of thinking.

The first scenario leads Egypt into a dark Islamic path. This path entails an Egypt under the dominance of Islamists who will continue to usurp every little ounce of freedom, intelligence, and modernity out of existence. The moderates in this case will either flee, if they can, or succumb to the new rules and escape into their newly activated cocoons: living in gated compounds and hiding in their underground havens. They will smuggle their booze in and watch cable TV that takes them beyond Egypt. That is if they are lucky. In the meantime, the rest of Egypt will continue to rot. These moderates will recognize the truth: they are a minority and minorities have no say in dogmatic authoritarian societies.

The second scenario will be even bleaker. In this one, the moderates will not let go that easily; they will keep fighting the Islamic rule, and the more they lose ground, the more they will fight back till the bitter end. In this scenario, Egypt will be on the verge of a civil war, if not a
full-fledged one, something no one can fathom because Egyptians are not blood thirsty by nature.

The third scenario is the most feasible, still grim, nonetheless: a forever embattled and never-at-peace Egypt. Moderates here don’t win but don’t despair. They keep panting and gasping furiously behind the Islamists waiting for a change or an acceptance to no avail. They’ll fight forever, maybe losing ground and motivation, but not giving up. In this projection, the poor will remain poor, the uneducated will remain uneducated, and the whole society will skirt around chaos and poverty.

The three scenarios are bitter and heartbreaking. However, the truth is often so: Egypt may never go back to where it was before the revolution. Quite the contrary, Hosni Mubarak’s days, with their bad, and, much to my chagrin, their good, are a forgotten past that most Egyptians see as a mirage now. The penalties of freedom of speech and democracy are clear. Before Egyptians were to gain these noble privileges, they should have gained the basics: awareness, understanding, tolerance, and respect.

I would love to be proven wrong, but I honestly don’t see the light.
An Egypt for all—too much to hope for?
October 4, 2012

A few months back, my post of August 2, 2012 begged “President Morsi to do something, or else this will become the norm.” I begged him to come out and denounce the horrendous actions taking place against Copts. I asked him to lead democratically, and become, as he promised, the president of ALL Egyptians, so that Egyptians would take heed and ultimately follow his lead.

And they would have done. They wouldn’t have followed Sadat’s or Mubarak’s wishes because the latter were not Islamists, and they were not revered by all Islamist factions across Egypt. However, Morsi is. Utilizing this ability is vital. Fairness and firmness by Morsi would have cut the aggression short.

But aggression has become the norm since President Morsi did not do much. And the Islamists on the streets inferred the message: it’s acceptable to wreak havoc with this country, to do what they please, and to treat Copts the way they deem fit.

Events have happened with fierce rapidity—leaving Copts homeless, dead, imprisoned, evicted, detained in juvenile establishments, and much more. The Coptic community in general is feeling the bias and discrimination. They also feel estranged and helpless in their own country.
Copts in Dahshour, Arish, and elsewhere have been evicted from their homes. Homes and stores have been destroyed, churches torched and vandalized. By the looks of it, Copts may soon fear stepping out of their homes.

Consider the Coptic detainees and investigations. Albert Saber has been detained pending investigation after he discussed atheism on his Facebook page. Bishoy Kamel was sentenced to six years for posting blasphemous cartoons. And now we have two children—a nine-year-old and a ten-year-old who were treated as juvenile delinquents and placed under the custody of the court, for tearing pages of the Koran and destroying them. Both kids were released today, but not acquitted.

And the worst way to deal with this strife is the double standards. The sheiks and Islamic TV figures are by far worse than the youngsters tearing the Koran. The sheikhs reach out to millions; they can manipulate the naïve public, who upon hearing the sheikhs “wise” sermons, get enraged.

But when Sheikh Abou Islam burns the Bible in front of the US Embassy and yells disdainfully, “And next time, I will urinate on it,” he is not called on his action. When on TV he refutes the Bible’s existence, no one questions his remarks. And when Sheikh Wagdi Ghoneim behaves similarly, degrading Christians with foul language and demeaning insults, he remains free. Wagdi Ghoneim went even further—he showed the 14-minute movie of Prophet Mohammed on his TV program. I call this a double standard in every sense of the word—one law for Islamists, another for everyone else.

Islamic dominance is leaving not only Christians but also followers of other faiths in the same jeopardy. The modified constitution and Article 8 in particular are making people of other faiths, the Baha’is in particular, and Shiites, though not as much, fearful. Practicing their faiths, building their temples, and living their lives with equal rights in a democratic Egypt are goals that will be compromised.

Sectarian strife in Egypt will remain the worst of all challenges, and unless it is stopped, it will mushroom into a civil war. We’ve seen countries and regions such as Lebanon, Northern Ireland, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, etc., stagger under the burdens of civil war lasting decades.
Once Egypt enjoyed an open unprejudiced society. It was the chosen place to immigrate to because it was safe. A multitude of diverse ethnic groups—Muslims, all Christians, Jews, Armenians, Italians, Greeks, Lebanese, Syrians, and Palestinians—mingled and lived together in the tolerant society called Egypt. Today we have succumbed to religious intolerance.

Interestingly enough, all Muslims in Egypt would consider Israel’s actions against the Palestinians despicable. They believe that the Palestinians were there first, and they have every right to live in peace in their own homeland. However, they wouldn’t see similarity between this scenario and what is happening to Copts in Egypt. But Copts existed in Egypt before Muslims; they, too, like Palestinians have every right to live in peace in their own homeland. Wouldn’t it be a revelation if Islamists could see the resemblance?

Intolerance breeds hatred and injustice. It also leads to further intolerance and the need to rebel and retaliate. The cycle never ends—from all sides.

It is with a heavy heart that I plead with President Morsi yet again: please do something, or this will become the norm.
Gerald Ford, the 38th president of the United States had a long list of bloopers including a tumbling streak—a gaffe that happened regularly. Our President Morsi, in his short time in office, has managed to accumulate his list of bloopers.

President Morsi’s first blooper occurred when he wrote a note on an Egyptian flag commemorating the soldiers who had died in Sinai; it said, “Dear Martyrs, wishing you all the best,” leaving Egyptians beside themselves with laughter and fury. Then at the United Nations, the president gave a sound, eloquent speech, but immediately destroyed his gains by adjusting certain body parts as he sat down to an interview—the footage went viral around the world. There are more but enough bloopers for now.

The blunders are by far more serious. During his presidential campaign Morsi promised to fix several deep-rooted problems in 100 days. The 100 days have come and gone, and very little has been achieved.

This is one of the president’s major blunders. The challenges he vowed to fix are so deep, so entrenched that no one would have been able to tackle let alone fix them in such a short span. This has left
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Egyptians in a sour mood, realizing that they were taken in by campaign propaganda.

During the presidential election and a few days prior to the official announcement of the presidential winner, and even before Shafik conceded, Morsi’s Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) announced him the winner.

This premature announcement created a situation whereby Egyptians concluded that the law, the Presidential Election Committee, the other presidential candidate, and all Egyptians did not count, that Dr. Morsi and his Party were above the law. Furthermore, the FJP had threatened to wreak havoc if its verdict of Dr. Morsi’s win were to be rejected. This meant that, had a late vote count shown that Shafik were the actual winner, and had the committee announced Shafik as the winner, mayhem would have engulfed Egypt.

Then came the Tahrir scene where President Morsi chose to talk to the people first before being officially sworn in. The act that no Egyptian will forget is of Morsi opening his jacket to exhibit that he wasn’t wearing a protective shield under his jacket; the Islamists in the square loved it. Ironically though, Morsi had two-dozen bodyguards surrounding him.

Since then, a deluge of bodyguards guards the president 24/7, and he travels in a huge motorcade accompanied by assorted vehicles, motorcycles, and a security entourage.

So, for instance, when the president prays, which he does diligently, the motorcades and the protective measures cost Egyptians millions. Stringent search procedures leave the other mosque visitors baffled and dismayed. Wouldn’t it be better if he prayed in the secluded mosque, in the presidential palace annex, they say?

Still, and while on the praying issue, Morsi often speaks to “his constituency” from the altar of the mosque he’s visiting. This is hardly the appropriate venue. It implies that Christians are not of the essence. It would be more effective if Morsi spoke from neutral venues that serve all Egyptians.

But the grandest fiasco is the theatrical show that took place during the October 6th War celebration. In a convertible, Morsi circled the
stadium waving to the cheering crowds wearing an open white shirt, with his half dozen bodyguards hanging around the car in identical outfits—a black suit with a white tieless shirt. Egyptians could hardly contain themselves. Not even the real October 6th hero, Sadat, would have partaken in such a ridiculous exhibit.

President Morsi utilized the moment and the celebrations to promote his self-image surrounding himself by thousands of cheerers and Islamists, including those who served sentences linked to the assassination of President Sadat. Though Morsi looked triumphant, he was assuming victory for an act he had absolutely nothing to do with—a fact Egyptians realized immediately.

And twice Morsi has promised to be at an event or a destination and then failed to show up: the funeral held for the murdered Sinai soldiers and in Rafah to talk to the evicted Copts. Both no-shows left Egyptians even more disheartened.

Today, since news travels fast, just about all Egyptians will have heard of the above incidents. Disappointingly, these are the matters that Egyptians are focusing on. Even if President Morsi is exerting a strenuous effort to fix Egypt’s dilemmas, Egyptians will perceive nothing but these bloopers and blunders.

President Morsi needs to hire some seasoned and efficient PR personnel to avoid repeating similar disturbing blunders. Statesmanship, in this era of mass communication, depends on both action and how actions are perceived. Egyptians will recognize Morsi’s efforts—if these exist—only when he can present his presidency in a statesmanship manner. Leadership is a matter of both ability and the will and skill to communicate that ability.
This piece was written as I prepared to speak about Egypt to a group of business majoring students at Capilano University. Having searched for articles that fit my topic, and not found any to my liking, and having found material that focused on do's and don'ts only, I decided to write my own blog post about the social side of conducting business in Egypt.

Egypt—has had its share of influences. Turks, British, Arabs, Romans, and many more have passed through Egypt. The Hyksos, Napoleon, and Alexander the Great, all invaded Egypt, too. Armenians, Greeks, Italians, Syrians, Jews, and Palestinians all immigrated to Egypt at one point or another and became part of the society. This made Egypt quite open to foreign ways. And with a population hitting 90 million, Egypt represents an untapped market ready to accept business deals from everywhere.

If you plan on doing business in Egypt, or even accepting a short contract, you will most probably be heading to Cairo, one of the most congested cities in the world. Traffic will leave you dumbstruck. Vehicles of all sizes and shapes, donkey-pulled carts, bicycles, scooters, and pedestrians all mingle together to form one chaotic entity. This has
left Cairenes no other choice but to plan their goings and comings with traffic in mind—heading out an hour early or lingering for an hour in the evening helps with the commute; Friday morning is best for getting stuff done, Saturday is good, too; early evening, surprisingly is the worst.

Traffic is almost always horrendous; and most Egyptians don’t really follow the set traffic: they dash quickly before the signal turns red, ignore set lanes, honk their horns at all times, avoid buckling their seat-belts, and speed dangerously if given a chance—a chaotic commute is a usual commute. I’ve had my car hit from behind; then the other driver stormed out of his car to shout, “Why did you stop?” Hmmm. I was at a traffic light? Not a good enough reason to stop?

If you go to Cairo, do not make the effort to drive—driving will make your stay in Egypt unnecessarily tense. Cabs are inexpensive and available everywhere.

In addition to the traffic, Cairo is also a hustling and bustling city with street vendors everywhere calling on you to view their products: clothes hanging off carts; and chopped, diced and peeled vegetables for your pick—an informal economy working furiously along with the formal one. Though chaotic, Cairo boasts a lively, mesmerizing, and vibrant atmosphere.

Because of the mayhem on the streets, two life-style features have emerged—tardiness and deliveries. It is quite usual for Egyptians not to arrive on time or not at all. Please don’t be offended—punctuality is something that can’t be fulfilled easily. And maybe the meeting will be set for 10 p.m.; that’s very appropriate, too.

As for deliveries, and again because of how difficult it is for consumers to get to places or find parking spots, just about anything can be delivered to your doorstep: any food concoction, prescription drugs, groceries, wine and beer, and cleaned laundry. Then again spa beauticians, barbers and hair stylists, lab technicians, and doctors do home visits, too. Need to get your cholesterol tested? Call the lab and a technician will show up at your doorstep bright and early, and then deliver the results, too.

As far as weather is concerned, Cairo is usually very hot but dry. I’d avoid being there from June to September. Winters are beautiful
though: the forecast—20 and sunny. Head to Cairo between October and March if you can arrange your timing or your stay is short. The Khamaseen, fifty days of possible windy sand storms, begins in late March. And then the heat arrives making late afternoons the least productive hours of the day.

As for Egyptians themselves, they are hospitable, friendly, distinctly loud, and very humorous. After a business transaction is completed, expect to be invited to your host’s home where a splendid array of scrumptious foods will be presented. You may find the spread too grand, but that’s OK. It’s the Egyptian way. You are not expected to eat it all.

You will enjoy being with Egyptians because of their friendliness. You will find them easy going and down to earth. Lots of hugging and kissing happen amongst men, and the same goes amongst women. Loud, vociferous laughs will dominate all meetings even while negotiating million-dollar deals.

The volume in Cairo seems to have been set on a louder-than-usual setting. It is easy to recognize this once you arrive at Cairo’s airport. It is clearly an Egyptian trait, which even if they try to overcome, they never succeed. Accept it! They are not shouting at you; that’s their way.

Then the concept of noise pollution is non-existent, and people are totally oblivious of the raucous hullabaloo. They yell and talk to one another from across halls and offices. They maintain conversations across the streets or from balconies. Street peddlers shout their products as they roam any neighbourhood. And since intersections don’t have stop signs, drivers honk to warn the cars crossing. If you are susceptible to noise, you may resort to earplugs when you need to do some deep thinking. Otherwise, go along; soon you’ll consider it white noise.

Egyptians honk their cars to call one another down from five-story buildings. Ahmed has his own three-beep honk, which Aly from the fifth floor knows quite well, so when he hears that distinct honk, he looks down from his fifth—floor balcony and shouts to Ahmed, “I’ll be down in a second.” This has changed somewhat after the arrival of cell phones, a blessing from this perspective.

This brings us to cell phones. No one else uses cell phones as much as Egyptians. Even eight and nine year olds own cellphones. And since
Egyptians tend to talk on the phone incessantly, they may continue to do so during a business meeting; they will answer a call, rather apologetically, but however inconvenient, they talk to the caller: “Hello Mona, how are you? Yes, I can’t talk to you right now. I’ll call you once the meeting is over (a pause to listen). OK, see you at 7 p.m. then.”

It’s only with humour that Egyptians have managed to overcome their hurdles and challenges. Egyptians laugh through their sorrows and pains. They make jokes about themselves and laugh their crises off. It is part of how Egyptians live. Enjoy the easygoingness and laugh along.

Egyptians don’t follow rules and guidelines, their lives are casual and informal. If you are doing business with Egyptians, set the guidelines straight from the first meeting. Negotiate your deal clearly and have it in writing. Communication will not be an issue since most Egyptians speak some form of English or French. Don’t get me wrong; they want your business; however, for your comfort and sanity, do it your way.

Egypt is a conservative society. People dress conservatively though brightly and lavishly. Accessories are acceptable and jewelry often jingles. Though they are very friendly, I’d take the cue from my business partner for how I should react. Especially in today’s Egypt, the range between what is acceptable and what isn’t is wide. In Egypt, though unusual, a woman may hug an acquaintance, while another may opt not to shake his hand.

And in spite of all this, or because of all this, Egypt is an enjoyable place and a truly great place to visit. Turn a blind eye to the chaos, the noise, and pollution, and you will have a blast. Take in the warmth of the people and weather, and enjoy the splendor of the Nile, the sand dunes, and the pristine seacoast along both the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. And leave time to visit the outstanding historical sites, too.
Was Mubarak not too bad after all?

October 30, 2012

Amidst the unprecedented mayhem of Egypt today, some may question whether the revolution merely disillusioned Egyptians, presenting false hopes that led nowhere. Are conditions today what Egyptians had desired and hoped for? Had they known the outcome, would they have opted to go this route? Does any Egyptian feel that today is better than yesterday?

The Revolution gave Egyptians hope. They believed that the world had finally given them a chance, an opportunity, through which they could emerge after years of despair. But let’s be honest. The state of Egyptians, 21 months after the Jan 25 Revolution, is far worse than it was before it, when Mubarak was still living in his ivory tower totally oblivious to the agony befalling most Egyptians. All Egyptians would agree with this in spite of agreeing earlier that Mubarak had to go.

If we compare pre-revolution to post-revolution, was Mubarak not too bad after all? Let’s rewind and consider Mubarak’s era. Mubarak overstayed his welcome, and his cronies usurped Egypt’s fortune. He lost the battle against poverty. He had no plan to improve education or the health system. And during his 30 years in office, corruption became rife.
In addition, Egyptians considered him a not-too-bright-a-person. His demeanor and his comments always let him down; Egyptians made him a laughing stock naming him “La vache qui ri,” the laughing cow; when he spoke informally without inhibition, he usually ended goofing up. Like the time he asked the weaver making handmade carpets when they were going to mechanize the process, or when he looked at the pregnant woman and asked her if she was married.

But Egypt was safer; walking on the street was a non-issue: no harassment or groping, and no thugs to mug you. No one would’ve dared evict a Copt or blatantly attack a judge or an army officer. More importantly, Mubarak held the jihadists at bay, especially in Sinai.

Mubarak’s decisions were rarely rescinded. They may not have always been perfect, but they remained firmly intact. From this perspective, Egyptians accepted the law and adhered to it to the best of their abilities. Compare this to the level of lawlessness to which we are exposed today.

Yes, we had a democratic election; and no, we are not killing one another on the streets like Syrians, and our toppled ex-leader is safely behind bars; still, we are in disarray.

Fast-forward and we see a bleak picture. Nothing of true value has been accomplished. The poor are poorer, the thugs stronger and rowdier, and the lawlessness, or at least the trend towards taking the law into one’s hands, wilder.

And President Morsi may not ever amass money at the expense of the people, but he is lavishly spending it, if not on the many trips he’s making, then on the security and surveillance team that escort him on these trips, on his guarded prayer duties, and on the 18 advisor posts he has initiated. And when he gives money to the people in the shape of a raise in salary or pension, prices immediately rise.

Furthermore, Egyptians are unable to take President Morsi’s decisions seriously either. As soon as he makes one, it is cancelled as in his decisions to re-establish the parliament, and to retire the Chief Prosecutor. Then, of course, there is the new law to shut stores at 10 p.m., which will be abused horrendously until it is cancelled.
Rewriting Egypt’s constitution the Islamic way

One other conspicuous decision was to allow Islamist jihadists out of prison to appease the various Islamic parties. A few days afterwards, the Sinai attack took place causing 16 deaths. Egyptians are connecting the two incidents together.

Morsi’s bloopers seem worse than Mubarak’s—wishing the murdered Sinai men all the best, adjusting his body parts in public, eating off a mat with his buddies in the presidential palace, and, in spite of praying in a mosque, praying alone as he is surrounded by a dozen bodyguards while he prostrates on a single prayer mat when all other worshippers have nothing to kneel on.

Secondly, the Islamists have absolute reign over the country with their 15th century narrow-mindedness. More importantly, the political discourse revolves around Sharia restrictions, suppressing women’s rights and eliminating their achievements, and alienating those who don’t belong in the Islamic mainstream.

In conclusion, was Mubarak that bad after all? Undoubtedly, he was. If we view the standard by which the majority of Egyptians lived, he failed miserably, and he should have been ousted several decades ago.

But the main question is even more poignant. If we knew then what we know now, would we have gone after him with the same fury? I’ll leave that to you to decide.

The law restricting the opening and closing time for shops and restaurants has already been cancelled.
If he were vindictive, Mubarak would be jumping up and down in his cell and laughing with glee. He would be watching the current events unfold and saying, “I told you so, but you didn’t listen.” The tyrant has landed in Torra Prison serving a life sentence, and Egyptians are living a free and just life. Or are they? The reality is dismal: another more hostile and destructive tyrant has replaced Mubarak.

Mubarak’s ousting was long overdue. But Mubarak never resorted to the blatantly oppressive actions we are seeing today. Mubarak wasn’t a meek or subdued leader either, but today’s tyrant is performing in the open, on the street, and with total confidence. Might, it seems, is unequivocally right.

The new tyrant to replace Mubarak consists collectively of the ultra conservative Islamic parties that are outright oppressive. They seem to think that they are above the law, or maybe they are the law, and it is up to them to implement the new, yet extremely ancient, order.

After Jan 25, these parties emerged as winners. All Egyptians should have come out the other end as winners. However, to be the single winner among many competitors is another matter altogether. Radical Islamists believe that they are on earth to direct the world via the Koran and Sharia. Blindfolded into compliance, they find no other law, sect, religion, or course acceptable. It is Sharia or nothing. And they are willing to apply abhorrent sentences on those who don’t comply—in broad daylight for everyone to see and be forewarned.
It seems that we have replaced Mubarak and his men by the fundamentalists after all.

The incidents are numerous; the preachers, intense and ignorant; the course, narrow and ugly.

Fundamentalists are out and about, talking freely on Islamic TV channels and admonishing viewers for accepting the current blasphemous state. They claim that murals and statues, Egypt’s treasures, must be hidden from sight. They claim that singing the Egyptian national anthem is blasphemous, too, since it entails just that: singing. And they burn the Bible claiming that such action shouldn’t be insulting to Christians because the Bible really doesn’t exist.

At the constitutional level, the Islamists are adamant about exclusive adherence to Sharia law, ignoring the rights of minorities, women, and the general population. And the prohibition of FGM, female genital mutilation, is again on the table for discussion. The most damaging matter in all this is that they are willing to shed blood to accomplish their goals.36

It’s one thing to pose threats or put ideologies up for discussion, but the chilling incidents on the street are more terrifying. A hardline Islamist stabbed and killed a young man in Suez because he was walking with his fiancée. Two elementary school children had their hair, or part of their braids, cut by the teacher because their parents refused to implement the teacher’s wish: to have them wear a headdress. Then two nine-year-old Copts were sent to juvenile detention because they destroyed the Koran, though they were let go a few days later.

This is all happening while many Coptic families are living in dire fear. Incidents in Rafah, Dahshour, and Amereya left them on the street having been evicted from their homes by emboldened Islamists while the security forces were unable to protect them.

The arts have also been under fire. The case against Adel Imam for ridiculing Muslim preachers in his movies is one of many. Elham Shaheen’s case is even more repugnant: she was demeaned to the level of a prostitute, again because of the roles she played on the screen.

Gibran Khalil Gibran’s *The Prophet* and many other recognizable works are being censored today after being available in the Egyptian market for years on end.

These actions are extreme, but the slow, less obvious but wholly enveloping changes nonetheless are more worrisome. No one was ever sworn in by using the Koran before. Now it is being implemented. I’m wondering how Copts will be sworn in from now on.

Changes to school textbooks are happening as we speak with images on book covers of men in beards, or changes in the context itself directing the young readers to following “the party.”

How far will the new tyrants go? How downright aggressive will they become? And where will all this lead Egypt? This is the most terrifying matter of all.

Then again, Mubarak may not be vindictive, and if he isn’t, he would be deeply distressed and disheartened over what Egypt is going through today—just as many Egyptians are.

IN 1995, AND DURING QUEBEC’S MAJOR STRUGGLE TO SEPARATE FROM the rest of Canada, the results of the referendum were extremely close, but the non-separatists won nonetheless. Canada breathed a sigh of relief, but the infuriated Jacques Parizeau, Quebec’s premier then, in his conceding speech, said that the reasons why the votes tilted towards the non-separatists were “money and ethnic vote.” This phrase resonated poorly with the “ethnic voters” and throughout Canada.

In addition to immediately costing him his position and political career, Parizeau’s notorious phrase is quite telling. The ethnic vote, in other words, the minorities in Quebec, were the reason Quebec did not separate.

The results of the US 2012 elections are in. President Obama won another four years in office. Of course, many reasons came to play, but the ethnic Hispanic vote played a significant role in the elections. Mitt Romney seemed to have put his foot in his mouth when he opposed any form of amnesty for illegal immigrants, instead encouraging illegal aliens to return home voluntarily in “a policy of self-deportation.”

felt targeted and ostracized, and Latino voters abandoned Romney en masse.

Hispanics are the largest minority base in the US after African Americans. They form 16 percent—50 million Latinos—of the 308 million US population. Analysts agree that Romney’s words against Latinos increased President Obama’s abilities to secure another term in the White House.

Now, let us see how presidential and parliamentary elections were run in Egypt. The concept of exclusion, versus inclusion, was the prominent one. From the start Egyptians were so polarized that the elections became a life-threatening struggle. In some instances the strife amongst politicians seemed to say, “I will win or you will die” instead of saying, “I will win because I can get your vote.”

Intentionally the Freedom and Justice Party, and more so the Al Nour Party, marginalized Egyptian Christians, be it Copts or other Christians. Both parties ran on platforms that ignored minorities. In Egypt, the goal was to win by playing down the value of minorities, by not giving them much thought or presence, and by assuming they are not there. The battle demoted and sidelined minorities. “Our” followers, “our” team, and “our” party were presented as superior to and more capable than the opposition. You were either one of us or you were a nobody: this seemed to be the way the campaigns were conducted.

Egyptians Christians should be a group to be reckoned with, with ten percent of the total population of Egypt. If one candidate can add an average of 9.3 million to his voters, he would win by a huge margin. Not that all 9.3 million would vote, but it is a notion worth considering.

Not only in Egyptian political elections but also in social choices made regularly, the shrewd candidate should go after the votes of minorities. If two Muslims run for an elected post such as the president of a union or of a social club, for example, if one candidate can sway the Copts to choose him, he will win over the other runner.

And since it is indeed very easy to alienate voters, it is up to the candidates to choose the path of exclusion or inclusion.
I also must encourage Copts to realize their potential in any campaign. Copts must understand that they are indeed a power: humility and humbleness, both wonderful human traits, are not the way to go in today’s Egypt.

By the same token, the party that can collaborate with minorities, and be able to get their votes, would be the winner. And the amusing matter would be that Egypt would come out the winner, too. Instead of divided and polarized, a single Egyptian entity would preside.

Disappointingly, I don’t think this is something that can be accomplished amidst the ambience we are living in today. It’s a mindset that may take decades, to turn around—if it’s possible at all.
Yes, we can? No, we definitely can’t!

November 16, 2012

By mid November, the skirmishes between Gaza’s Hamas and the Israelis escalate into another full-fledged attack on Gaza. Hundreds of Palestinian civilians are killed including the head of Hamas’s military wing.

“His bottom bare yet he shimmies to and fro.” This Egyptian proverb applies to the responses of Egyptians to the current round of Israeli bombings and attacks on Gaza. The meaning: if you don’t have what it takes, you shouldn’t be showing off.”

Infuriated and disgusted, I must condemn the happenings in Gaza, but this is not our issue today. Our issue is with the raucous response that seems to resonate in Egypt with regard to what action Egypt should take.

The West says that the Israeli aggressions are in response to rockets continually falling in and around Tel Aviv. The mainstream media in the West see these events as independent of previous hostilities and also of the original crisis, failing to consider the Gazans’ plight—Gaza has been under siege for six years and in a war for six decades. They look at Palestinians and say, “You are starting another round again?” as though
no context exists, and forgetting that Palestinians are effectively imprisoned in their own land.

The Arab World, outraged, insists that Israel is behaving barbarically, killing innocent children, and slaughtering an already beaten-down people. It is also enticing its leaders to break the truce; “Kill your enemy! Stop the talk and act; get to it,” they are saying.

It is not important who started this round anymore. Rockets are indeed falling on Israel, and Israel is attacking Gaza with a vengeance. It seems that an escalation is imminent. And since it isn’t a fight between equals, Gazans are yet again having their precious but desolate homeland demolished.

Some are calling on President Morsi to take action and join the fighting forces against Israel. They want a forceful response, which would make Israel fear its neighbours and bow with respect and shame. They want to widen this war even further, now, today, again.

But before we consider any action at all that might come from Egypt, we need to turn to a different front altogether, but a very important one nonetheless. Egypt is on the brink of bankruptcy. It has had 20 months of absolute dysfunction, and no end is in sight. Prime Minister Qandil’s government has just announced that the subsidy on gas will be lifted causing gas to double, if not triple, in price. No doubt people will return to the streets in what some call the “Revolution of the Hungry,” those who have been hit the hardest in all this.

In addition, Egypt is unable to protect its border let alone strap on another war. Radical Islamists continue to attack checkpoints and kill Egyptian soldiers. These Jihadists from within Egypt and those crossing the border through the tunnels from Gaza are determined to hit Egypt hard. So far nothing worthwhile has been accomplished with regard to ending these attacks on Egypt’s borders.

Egypt’s productivity is at an all-time-low. Currently, Egypt has no tourism sector to talk about, and 25 percent of Egypt’s working force is jobless. The streets are packed with vendors hoping to gain a meager few pounds a day from selling and reselling since no permanent jobs exist.

But most importantly Egypt’s army forces, for months, have replaced the police force in protecting Egyptians from themselves. And in spite
of this immense role, the army has remained disregarded and degraded. With the many upheavals it has had to face—sectarian strife, police force protests, and a targeted Sinai—the army is fatigued and exhausted.

In addition, due to the years of peace that Egypt has been enjoying, the army has diverted its attention to work on other projects: building bridges, opening factories, paving roads, etc. It seems to have been focusing on these efforts instead of its main goal of protecting the country and responding to enemies. Its ability to participate in a retaliatory war is doubtful.

To escalate matters would be fatal. Egyptians should be aware of the consequences. So far Egypt has not yet reached doomsday; this approach would take it there. The repercussions of a war would undoubtedly be the final straw that would force Egypt to its knees.

To fight a war, you must be first, fully aware of the consequences—the best scenario and the worst scenario; two, be able to realize your enemy’s abilities; three, understand where you stand exactly in terms of your capabilities. And an answer to all these demands is a simple word: fiasco.

It is not shameful—many would say it is wise—to know one’s own limitations. There is no embarrassment in saying that Egypt cannot plunge itself in a war. Sadat’s words come to mind. He knew that the US would never allow Israel to fall, and since Egypt could not fight the US, peace was the way to go.

Being realistic and rational are not Egyptian traits. If Egyptians were so, they would realize that staying put is what Egypt must do for now. If some Egyptians want to fight, then they should by all means cross into Gaza, fight amongst the Gazans, and give their lives to their cause.

Egyptians should stop shimmying until they can cover themselves.
All liberals withdraw from the Constitutional Assembly leaving Islamists to function freely and do as they please. Mohammed Mahmoud Street sees another round of clashes causing casualties, arson attempts on the nearby school, and the total ransack and burning of the Jazeera offices in Tahrir. The rail catastrophe in Assyot, which killed 51, of whom 49 are children, leaves Egypt reeling. And though North Sinai is in a respite, Gaza faces one of the worst Israeli attacks ever.

The catastrophes are endless—they keep coming swiftly and ferociously. One actually has no time to condemn, condole, or commiserate before another event hits with equal fierceness.

Today, Egypt is living the worst days of its modern history. It seems as though there is actually no hope; Egyptians, collectively, are slowly but surely destroying what used to be a great country, and in the deep past, a great civilization.

But the worst is that Egyptians have become so divided, so far apart in agendas and priorities, that it doesn’t seem plausible that they can ever unite under one flag or for one cause—Egypt—ever again. What a
stark difference from the united front that emerged in Tahrir Square 20 months ago and made us all proud.

Fundamentalism is seeping into mainstream Egypt; it comes in various degrees and with a wide range of followers: the ignorant, intolerant, and abusive—all together standing as a barrier against the new Egypt. They have, after a long struggle with previous regimes, found their voices. Extremely aggressive and narrow minded, these ultra Islamists are confronting moderate Egyptians and insisting on their way or none.

Though the Islamists are set in their ways, the liberals are not much better. They, too, are neither listening nor accepting, although they have no clear plan or course for Egypt.

Liberals and activists are today unable to regroup and form a strong coalition. They are losing ground. This is leaving them frustrated and flailing blindly and always blaming the other side.

The Assyot train catastrophe is a case in point. With the country’s infrastructure in such poor conditions, with indifference so dominant a factor, how could President Morsi, in his five months in power, have fixed the railway system before an accident like Assyot’s? To have avoided such a catastrophe, one would have needed to change the attitudes of Egyptians and the mindset of the working poor, in addition to having spent billions to resurrect the dying rail system. Any incoming president would have failed. It’s Morsi’s bad luck that he is in charge, that’s all. And yet blind accusations and stern criticism have laid the blame totally on the new government and indeed on the president.

Then the clashes on Mohammed Mahmoud Street, which should not have taken place, gripped the nation. How can anyone be naïve enough to expect the police force to watch as some protestors decide to relive the scene from last year or to crash into the Ministry of Interior? Violence was again met with violence. And so liberals blame Morsi for both catastrophes.

How far apart are the Islamists from the liberals? So far apart, so distinctly different that no circumstances could bring them together. The two groups have interlocked horns and clenched their fists, and
are set to annihilate. Both sides are adamant and narrow minded, and so unnecessarily hateful, that there is no way out.

Will Egyptians ever be willing to accept that Egypt belongs to moderates, liberals, Muslims, Christians, Bahaias, Communists, Nasserists, Ikhwan, and Salafis? That is in addition to the pro-Mubaraks, the couch sitters, and the activists?

If we can see Egypt as a home for the multitudes, the shelter that protects us all, we may become more understanding of one another. Liberals cannot deny that Islamists exist and, ironically, will not go away; simultaneously, the Ikhwan and the Salafis must allow some room for maneuvering and stop being so dead set on their course.

The only way out of this dilemma is to regroup as Egyptians again, to take a deep breath and unite for the benefit of Egypt. Funny though, every time I mention this as the only solution, both sides come out saying, “But the others are the ones who started.” This reminds one of young kids sulking over who got the ball.

What Egypt needs now is a good shake up, a realization that we are about to lose her if we continue along such a path. We must work together and include everyone; we must stop attributing the failure to one group because everyone is at fault.

Let’s agree to disagree and yet work together for a united Egypt.
The Egyptian will

November 26, 2012

A remarkable people those Egyptians are. They never fail to surprise me.

When President Morsi announced the Constitutional Decree, on November 22, Egyptians could hardly believe their ears. After all what they went through to reach freedom and justice, the by-the-people-and-from-the-people elected president deviously changed the rules of the game to the sole benefit of his party, and of himself.

The decree gives President Morsi free hand to surpass all other authorities in Egypt. In a sense, he becomes the only authority, a pharaoh, as Egyptians have started calling him. And Egyptians, from all walks of life, went ballistic.

The timing, essence, and tone of the decree are clearly those of some advisors who know nothing about politics and, more importantly, nothing about the Egyptian people. The consequences are clear: Morsi is facing the same outright revolt that Mubarak faced only 20 months ago.

Totalitarianism is the wrong way to go and is extremely dangerous especially at a time when Egyptians have hardly forgotten their success
against the previous regime. And yet even Mubarak would not have encroached on people’s liberties in this fashion.

President Morsi must have assumed that the Egyptians would be baffled—most probably; angry—so be it; and unable, so go ahead. The Egyptians have proven him wrong. Baffled and angry? Yes, but able and willing.

For the last four days Egyptians defied the president openly and vigorously showing that there are many ways that a so-called powerless people can stand against a ruler.

Maintaining the original motto of the revolution, “keeping it peaceful,” they filled Tahrir Square, pitched their tents, and camped out once more. And because most Egyptians abhor bloodshed, they are keeping away from those who may be supporting the president, and they from them—a wise decision by both groups.

The Tahrir activists were joined early on by many political leaders who joined hands and walked together in solidarity: Al Baradei, Amr Moussa, and Hamdeen Sabahi amongst others. They are all calling for the annulment of the decree with all its articles. They insist that no negotiations or discussions will take place until the decree is cancelled.

And Egyptians did not stop there. The judicial system, the hardest hit by the decree, has placed the courts on hold, refusing to deliberate or consider cases. The Media Syndicate is considering a tentative blockage of all newspapers. The fury is viewed on all TV channels and resonates across all media sources. This is happening while Morsi’s supporters are trying hard to maintain balance but are unable to do so.

Can a hurting and depressed people unite against the will of a leader? Can those who have yet to see a decent day be willing to fight for their rights resorting to no weapons other than their brains and will? It seems they can. It seems that Egyptians have decided that this is a good enough reason to finally unite. Another revolutionary wave is in the making.

According to the news sources and the various sources, just about all Cairo will be in Tahrir tomorrow, with similar actions to take place in other cities. Schools will shut their doors, and businesses will not function.
I don’t doubt that Egyptians will change the course of history, for when they unite, they become a force to be reckoned with. They’ve done it once, and it looks as though they are about to do it again.

My fear revolves around one issue: will Morsi, as Mubarak before him did, take these protests seriously, or will he treat Egyptians as Asaad has treated his people for the last 20 months? Now that I look back, I find Mubarak’s immediate and peaceful stepping down the best thing that could have happened to Egypt then. He could have stalled and continued to stand against his people; consequently, Egyptians would’ve fallen by the hundreds. How ironic that Mubarak’s most presidential act was his resignation.

Will President Morsi have the wisdom and clear vision to allow himself to make the right decisions? He ought to know by now that the decree was inappropriate and unsound. For Morsi, going back on his word surely trumps being the cause of more deaths and more agony.

Tomorrow, Tuesday, November 27, will be another memorable day in the history of Egypt: the day peaceful Egyptians proved they, in spite of their limited resources, have the power to shift the path Egypt takes.
I confess, I’m guilty. I have had my doubts many a time during the last 22 months. Sure I was for Mubarak’s ousting. Sure I was jubilant when Egyptians became free. I remember jumping up and down and cheering like a child as Omar Suleiman announced on television that Mubarak had stepped down.

But I also had many worries and concerns. The higher the bar went and the more adamant the demands became, the further I sunk into gloom and doom. Egypt was being torn apart, and it seemed that no one was for Egypt, but everyone was for being proven right and proving others wrong.

Then came November 27—a day almost as memorable as January 25. Morsi had announced his Constitution Decree, causing Egyptians to congregate in Tahrir once again.

Not surprisingly though, Tahrir saw many new faces. The couch sitters—hezb el kanaba, as they became known, were there—those who beforehand never left the comfort of their homes and seemed either against the activists or at least too worried about the after effects of the revolution. These are apolitical and peaceful Egyptians and yet they
were suddenly moved enough to protest—something they may never have done or thought they would do in their whole lives.

The “feloul” were there, too—the remnants of the old regime. They would never have before thought of approaching Tahrir, but there they were fighting for rights and justice as all other Egyptians.

These newcomers joined the old faces in Tahrir, those rugged with experience on how to abate the effect of tear gas, how to keep warm in the Square at night, and how to spend days and weeks in Tahrir far from family and relatives.

Morsi succeeded in uniting them all. It’s been difficult getting all these Egyptians to unite, and he has accomplished it. The troubling matter is that Morsi has united all these Egyptians against him.

And this time round I have no qualms or doubts; all Egyptians should be in Tahrir.

Just about every action that Morsi has taken since taking oath was displeasing to Egyptians. Even his wheeling and dealing in the Gaza crisis, though he was hailed as wise and pragmatic, hasn’t been clarified to the public. The ultimate ramifications are being leaked out to Egyptians by the Israeli media.

President Morsi has chosen the wrong route. Over and above the dictatorial decree, he opted to speak in its defense specifically to his followers instead of the Egyptian nation as a whole—an unforgivable error. On that particular day, behind him was his photograph in huge dimensions proving that he may have learnt nothing from Mubarak’s ordeal.

More “incidents” have aggravated Egyptians. Mrs. Morsi, who has yet to play any social role, travelled to Damanhour to pay her respect to the Muslim Brotherhood family who lost its son in the clashes that followed. She hadn’t paid respects to the families in Assyot where 49 children died in the train crash, or to any of the other fallen Egyptians here and there. I say, don’t go if you cannot go to all.

As days go by, the opportunity for Morsi to rescind his decree is slipping. He is proving he is more adamant and relentless in his ways than a country on the verge of a civil war can take. He is not uniting the people but leading them to the point of no return. Egyptians from all walks of life—judges, politicians, and ordinary people keep telling him
that this is unacceptable, and he denies that indeed the opposition exists or is of any consequence.

But by refusing to relinquish the decree, Morsi would be proving the following: he is unable to represent all Egyptians and doesn’t care what happens to them, for his allegiance is to the Muslim Brotherhood Party and his followers only. This is quite shameful.

President Morsi must bear the consequences of his action. It is acceptable to fight the regime or lawmakers. It is not acceptable to fight other Egyptians. President Morsi’s decree and obliviousness is forcing Egyptians to take that route: Egyptians against one another.

I have to warn President Morsi that Egyptians have learnt not to forego their rights, and they are, surprisingly enough, willing and ready to lose their lives for Egypt, justice, and freedom. Egyptians in Tahrir and elsewhere will not condescend.

Though President Morsi has succeeded in uniting Egyptians, he should wake up before it is too late, for the route he is taking leads to the abyss.
Hopeful Egyptians steer a hopeless situation

December 9, 2012

After two days of clashes between the protestors and the Islamists, President Morsi finally came out and gave a speech. I wish he hadn’t. I had anticipated this speech, thinking he would unite Egyptians, address them as one people instead of splitting them into followers and traitors. But Morsi denied that those who had been on the streets for the last two days cared about Egypt or had any right to voice their concern and dissatisfaction of the constitutional decree and the constitutional draft.

Morsi’s speech reinforced his allegiance to the Muslim Brotherhood. He considered those protesting a minority, hired thugs, and followers of Mubarak’s institution.

This left Egyptians in a daze; they couldn’t actually believe that their elected president would go as far as lying and changing facts in defense of the Muslim Brotherhood’s supremacy.

The clashes started when Brotherhood members crashed the peaceful protest at the presidential palace—around 100 protestors had camped there. Though rough, the clashes did not injure many, but the Brotherhood attackers ransacked and destroyed the tents and shooed the protestors out. Egyptians from around Cairo watched what was
happening and headed to the neighbourhood of the palace. That was when it turned ugly.

For two whole days, Egyptians fought one another. Some were killed. Muslim Brothers viciously assaulted the protestors with hand weapons, live ammunition, Molotov bombs, and stones and rocks. They also forced captive protestors to choose between admitting they were followers of the previous regime or succumbing to more beatings. Women had their mouths clamped shut or slapped hard that they fell on the ground by sheer force while men were brutally beaten and shamefully paraded. All this is validated with film footage. Videos of protestors with blood-splattered faces and swollen-shut eyes went viral.

For Morsi to turn the tables on these brave men and women, for him to say that the peaceful protestors don’t want legitimacy, or are Mubarak’s followers, made matters worse, encouraged the Brotherhood followers, and widened the rift even further between Egyptians.

But Morsi is in a bind: to be loyal either to his party, those who were his comrades for years, or to Egypt. He also has the Brotherhood leadership to listen to, and they are dictating the route that he should take.

Morsi’s and the Brotherhood’s conundrum lies in their inability to adjust to being out in the open after 80 years of conducting their business underground. Blinded by an astute craving for power, they resort to lies and deceit to further their supremacy.

Though Egyptians seem helpless, the situation is not hopeless. The more Morsi and the Brotherhood shock Egyptians, the more resolute they become. The more they are victimized, the higher the bar of demands goes. Something will have to give.

Today, Egyptians, other than the Islamists, are clearly set to defy their president. They won’t accept the decree or the constitutional draft. True, Egyptians are neither equipped for nor inclined to fight a street war, but they seem ready to persevere.

And they are gaining ground. Moussa, Baradei, and Sabbahi—three liberal leaders—have joined hands and formed the National Salvation Coalition to fight the decree and the constitution, an act that unites all the liberal fronts.
Those who never went to Tahrir or to any protest have come out in full force. At the Heliopolis Sporting Club, across the street from the presidential palace, grandmothers and genteel Egyptian women, those who never thought of protesting, abandoned the comfort of their club, crossed the street, and joined the protestors outside. They too stood their ground and told Morsi off.

Some of Morsi’s advisors are retiring or resigning. The head of the National Egyptian Television handed in his resignation. Khairy Ramadan, an Egyptian TV anchorman, refused to finish off his program and resigned on air in the midst of the program when his channel refused to have Sabbahi come on air and speak. The media, which had tried to be fair in all this and had always presented the two sides of any story, stopped inviting Islamic advocates on to voice their views.

In the meantime, the ceiling for demands is rising. Protestors were asking for the cancellation of the decree. Now they want Morsi to go as Mubarak did before him.

It is all up to Morsi now whether he ends the standoff between Egyptians or continues to give Egyptians further reasons to protest and call for his downfall.

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On December 9, President Morsi annuls his constitutional decree.

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To vote or not to vote
December 12, 2012

In May 2012, I wrote, “Don’t blink or the Egyptian political scene would pass you by.” Nothing has changed since—Egypt continues to face the same conditions today.

Laws, decrees, and decisions, made hastily, are abruptly announced but become void a few hours afterwards. Egyptians have a saying, “the words of yesterday are lathered with butter”—sliding off warm, melted butter is easy; what is said one day is forgotten the next.

This is all true since Morsi became president. Here are a few of the indecisive “decisions.” A meeting, set for December 12, today, organized by the armed forces to bring all Egyptian fronts together was cancelled; the tax hike announced by Qandil’s government, postponed; and Morsi’s constitutional decree, annulled. The law that sets the opening and closing hours for restaurants and shops was first postponed, then cancelled altogether.

And yet Morsi insists on having the vote on the constitution referendum on the set date—December 15, 2012. It is Wednesday, December 12, but very little has been finalized—a good depiction of how this government and the country are run.
The logistics of the voting process are all up in the air. Only 10% of all judges agreed to administer the referendum vote—will this number suffice, or will the referendum be administered over two phases to overcome the shortage in judges, and will this be legal? Egyptians have not been told where they will vote, or when they will vote—depending on whether the voting will be administered over one or two phases. The armed forces will secure the voting sites but has said that a two-phase voting is not an option. As far as monitoring the vote, neither journalists nor NGOs have been notified of schedule or voting polls.

As for the voters themselves, all Islamists will vote yes—whether they have read or assimilated the constitution is of no consequence. They are voting in support of Morsi and the overriding Islamic presence. To Morsi’s followers, consent is what matters. They have approved and hailed every erroneous decision Morsi has made in the last six months.

The “yay” voters’ choice is a given. It is the predicament of the nay voters that is more worrisome. They are divided amongst themselves. Some construe the “No” vote as an acceptance of the draft; to participate gives the constitution draft legitimacy. These voters will boycott.

The other group of “No” voters, hoping to create a strong front against the constitution, will vote “No.” They hope that they will have enough of a voice to overturn the constitution draft.

The liberal front was divided amongst itself during the presidential election. One candidate, Shafik, represented the old regime; the other, Morsi, represented the Muslim Brotherhood. Some liberals chose Morsi since he was the lesser of the two evils; they also gave him the benefit of the doubt. Again Egyptians say, “Squeeze a lemon” over the bitter-tasting concoction and go ahead and drink it anyways. These lemon squeezers, who decided to vote for Morsi in spite of themselves, may have tilted the scale towards a Morsi win. This division must not happen this time round.

Both groups, the boycotters and the naysayers, have valid reasons behind their choices. The boycotters say that the vote will be rigged and haphazardly conducted—proven by the state of affairs today, Wednesday,

December 12. The “No” voters are worried that a huge turnout from the “Yes” voters will trump the referendum; this would validate the constitution as it stands.

The Egyptian opposition may remain confused and worried, but they must unite. Voting seems to be the rational option.

My fear is that by boycotting the election we will have to live with the ramifications of a successful “Yes” vote. If the elections are conducted legally, and the vote is still a sweeping yes, then that’s the wish of the majority, and the opposition will have to concede and abide by the change. At least we will have taken the responsible action, participated, and practiced our voting rights. To boycott would be read by some as remaining disgruntled and ultimately not ready to accept democracy or work for a united Egypt.

On a more positive note, Hamdeen Sabbahi, of the National Salvation Front, urged Egyptians today to vote and say no.41 Those who are against voting needed this push to get them to go to the polls and unanimously say “No.”

The outcome is precarious. Let’s hope that the “No” voters come out strong and sway the pendulum against Morsi’s proposed constitution as it stands.

A Conflicted nation

*It ain’t over till the fat lady sings: Egyptians can’t but continue the struggle*

*December 25, 2012*

The results are in for the second phase of the Constitution Referendum. The “Yes” vote has again taken the lead. Between the two Saturdays, December 15 and December 22, almost two thirds of those who voted said yes.

The Islamists won the first referendum in March of 2011 with an overwhelming yes; they won the presidential election too, and Morsi squeaked in; and now they have won the Constitution Referendum, cementing their grip over Egypt.

As the “Yes” voters went to the polls, they were not only accepting the constitution as is with its loopholes and ambiguities, but they were also endorsing Morsi’s supremacy and Islamic inclination. It didn’t matter much if these Egyptians truly understood the legality or the repercussions behind the constitution. What mattered was affirming their allegiance to Islamic dominance personalized in Morsi—Egypt has become an Islamic theocracy.
From the start, the Constitution Assembly had tilted in numbers towards an Islamic favour, and soon enough the few non-Islamists, one after the other, resigned saying that a one track Islamic mind dominated the writing of the Egyptian Constitution.

In spite of the outcries that filled Egypt against the referendum, resulting in clashes and deaths in front of the El Itihadia, the presidential palace; in spite of a surrounded and debilitated Judicial Court; and in spite of the thousands of enraged Egyptians who stood their ground and told Morsi off, the results are in. The “Yes” voters seem to have won this round, too.

Also, and in connection to the constitution, the Shura Assembly, the Upper House, had to be chosen and announced. But many non-Islamists refused the supposedly prestigious and honourary post of being on the Shura Assembly. Though this may embarrass Morsi, it also means more Islamists are being called in to fill the empty seats. The parliamentary election, the Lower House, to be held in two months, will be the next battle, and again the majority will go to the Islamists.

One wonders if the Islamists do indeed outnumber the moderates in Egypt. If so, then maybe it is time for moderates and seculars to call it quits and accept the new Egypt.

This argument, however, fails miserably. Of the 51 million eligible voters, 32% voted, and of these 17 million, two thirds, that is ten million, said yes. Ten million don’t constitute a fundamentally Islamic Egypt.

Another reason why the numbers of Islamists don’t add up to being a majority is seen every time the Islamists rally. The Freedom and Justice Party rally organizers have to bus thousands of their supporters from around Egypt to create presence and strength. Never have the moderates or liberals resorted to such techniques to strengthen their rallies. All they need to do is summon the protestors and thousands come on their own free will.

Let’s go back to the vote. A legitimate vote that follows strict rules must be adhered to. But was this a legitimate vote?
Actually, violations were rife. This time round, rigging was rampant. There were the blatantly disqualifying tactics — suitcases with thousands of “Yes” forms, the judge who wasn’t a judge at all and who jumped out of the window to escape being caught, and the ads in front of polls encouraging people to vote yes. We also have the good-Samaritan judge who guided illiterate women by filling their forms for them.

Then there were the more subtle but underhanded tactics: the fact that all the judges who agreed to monitor the vote were Islamic as all non-Islamists refused to participate. And the polling station lineups that never budged: these polls were in the upper class neighbourhoods, the ones with voters who would presumably vote no. The aim was to guarantee that voters in these polling stations would give up and leave. Some voters queued for six and seven hours.

In spite of all these egregious offences, the referendum results and the constitution will go through. It is a done deal.

What tomorrow will bring is anyone’s guess, but more of the same seems most likely. The changes we are seeing today will bring only more friction, and the war between Egyptians will get only more vicious. No moderate Egyptian will give in to an Islamic supremacy easily, while the Islamists will remain set on their path. It seems that Egyptians are in for a long ride.

President Morsi, it ain’t over till the fat lady sings, and up to now, she hasn’t. Moderate Egyptians will not accept this new Egypt sitting down; the battle continues.

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Another lull before another storm
January 8, 2013

Egypt’s 1977 “Bread Riots,” as they were dubbed, arose when Anwar Sadat agreed to the terms set by the International Monetary Fund, the IMF, to remove subsidies on basic foodstuffs. In a spontaneous upheaval, hundreds of thousands went out to protest. Result: the subsidies were reactivated, but only after over 70 died and hundreds were injured. Today’s scene is reminiscent of the scene that provoked the 1977 riots.

Another storm is looming; in the meantime, Egypt has been put on hold.

Since December 22 when the constitutional vote produced 62% voter approval, Egyptians have gone into quiet-but-saddened mode. To them, the results solidified the futility of their attempts to change the course of events in Egypt: their efforts seemed to have all gone to waste. The revolution had produced an even more flagrantly tyrannical system, an incompetent president who sides with his clan, and a stagnant impasse amongst Egyptians.

Though saddened, Cairenes are going about their business in a normal fashion. Mid-year exams are in full swing. Feasts—Xmas, (December 25 and January 7) and New Year are being celebrated. And
the struggle to get from one place to another—the daily commute—remains an all-consuming feat.

Cairenes are taking all this—the normal, the festive, and the congested—in stride, but other more worrisome issues flag an upcoming storm.

The first sign is in the record-high prices on all basic foodstuffs. Also worrisome is the anticipated tax hike on gas and other commodities, including electricity. This while the dollar is slowly inching up against its dwarfed Egyptian counterpart. The bottom line is most Egyptians can’t make ends meet and with the new taxes, life will become extremely difficult.

In 1977, the “Bread Riots” hit Sadat’s Egypt. These riots remained one of the lowest moments in Sadat’s presidency. Egyptians today anticipate a similar scenario: the “Revolution of the Hungry,” where poor Egyptians will come out in droves to say enough is enough. This is a definite fear because this kind of uprising would not be clean and noble akin to January 25; it would be messy and violent. This President Morsi has to beware.

As a consequence, changes at the executive/governmental level are happening. President Morsi has been busy reshuffling the cabinet—ten new ministers have recently been sworn in. He hopes the changes will put energy into the economy. This remains to be seen.

And as Morsi’s ill-equipped cabinet remains slow in effecting change, Egyptians resort to the only way they can to overcome the mess: they laugh it off, with Morsi getting the brunt of the jokes. Egyptians, usually, respect the elderly, the leading figures, and the powerful, but Morsi has lost their respect. Whether he will be able to regain it back is up for question. This is why Morsi is trying unsuccessfully to halt the mockery. Many talk show hosts have been summoned for questioning and have court cases pressed against them—the charge: making fun of the Egyptian president. This approach is creating even further laughable moments.

But remorse is by far the worst sensation Egyptians are feeling today. In hindsight, many Egyptians are lamenting the good old days gone by. They know that Mubarak’s era was not good, but they are in a worst
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state, so much so that they are devastated. “How could we have possibly gotten ourselves into such a bind?” is today’s most ominous reflection.

Then January 25, 2013 is on our doorstep, but many Egyptians feel there is nothing to rejoice about. Two years after one of the most revered and respected revolutions, the dream is shattered.

January 25, 2013, will bring thousands to Tahrir Square once more, this time demanding the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood and Morsi. Most Cairenes are worried about that day. Though clashes will occur, and another storm will materialize, the path remains unchanged—the course on which Islamists have put Egypt will continue.

Yet in spite of the fear Islamists instill in Egyptians and in spite of the Islamic supremacy sought, at face value, nothing has changed. Moderate Egyptians party, wear tight clothes, drink, and show off their hair—if they so wish. They walk the club tracks in yoga pants and uncovered hair. They go shopping in ordinary clothes heeding no one. They celebrate Xmas and New Year with their Christian friends; they wish Christians well; that, in spite of, or because of, the Salafi fatwa that discouraged Muslims from doing just that. Tahrir Square was endowed a huge Xmas tree—something that never happened before. In all fairness, nothing has changed and moderate Egyptians remain themselves.

This lull promises to be short lived though; January 25 will bring another wave of animosity and anger. Egyptians await January 25, the second anniversary of the revolution with anticipation.
The media, today and yesterday

January 12, 2013

Two years ago, as the revolution brewed in Tahrir, I ranted about the media. Two years after the revolution, I’m still ranting about the media.

Egyptians aren’t relying on international media any more—CNN, Al Jazeera, and Al Arabiya are not the most reliable sources in today’s Egypt as Egyptian media open up to all kinds of discourse, delving into the analytical, the punitive, and the classified. And rightly so, for Egypt has always been the base of the soundest media in the Arab World.

Historically, Egyptian media have been the frontrunners with newspapers such as Al Ahram, along with Al Akhbar and others, in circulation for 90 years; with an influential TV presence that exported anchors, soap operas, and widely acclaimed programs; with the most prominent transnational radio service, Sout El Arab (the Voice of Arabs); and with the first satellite in Africa and the Middle East, Nilesat, emitting signals for over 500 channels.

So for Egyptians to appreciate the candidness and availability provided by today’s Egyptian media is a positive change.
In television lies the most dominant of all Egyptian media arms. Switched on in most households all the time, television focuses, now more than ever, on news and political dialogue.

Furthermore, the influx of channels allows Egyptians to choose from a variety of presenters and programs. Whether it is Mona El Shazli on MBC, Ibrahim Eissa on Al Tahrir, Amr Adeeb on Al Qahira Al Youm, or Reem Maged and Youssif Al Husseiny on OnTV, Egyptians can take their pick of sources. Alongside the commentators, eminent guests speak about events as they happen, and the results as they are predicted. More importantly, once a program is off the air, it is immediately YouTubed and then sent via cyberspace to Facebook, Twitter, and an unlimited number of blogs and websites. No piece of news is confined to a single showing anymore, but each one is broadcast all over the world instantly and watched as viewer needs compel.

In addition to the traditional and long-lived newspapers, many new papers have emerged in the last few years. For every group, there is a following; for every party, there is a newspaper; Al-Wafd, Al Arabi, Al Midan, Sawt el Ammah, and Al Watan are a mere handful of the dozens of independent newspapers. And for every one of these newspapers, there is an online version, and more often than not an English version, too.

Add social media to this mix, for social media got us where we are today. The spontaneity provided by social media is heralded as one of the reasons why the revolution persevered, and tweeters and bloggers found it an exceptional venue in which to funnel their views.

All the media arms, however, have become intertwined. A column, an article, or an editorial is rehashed on television; a TV program is YouTubed; and TV programs cite bloggers and mention tweets. The result is that news reaches Egyptians instantly and clearly. Bassem Youssef’s *El Bernameg*, a tongue-in-cheek political satire, airs on Friday; some Egyptians prefer to wait a few hours, and then watch it on YouTube, commercial free, since the program revels in the highest number of commercials ever. As you can see, the pool of sources is bountiful.
This is starkly different from Nasser’s black days when everyone read Al Ahram and watched the Egyptian National TV, and both media sources backed and revered the regime unquestionably. Today is a different era altogether, for when President Morsi asks for respect from the media, he doesn’t get it. As long as goof-ups are committed, the Egyptian media will keep after President Morsi with a vengeance, asking for change and due diligence.

But as regular mass media have developed into empires, sectarian and private media have flourished even further. Muslim and Christian channels are in abundance. It seems as though anyone can go ahead and establish a TV channel or open a newspaper to promote his ultra radical beliefs. Industry standards and regulations remain opaque and fuzzy and are applied arbitrarily by those in authority.

Radical Islamist channels and newspapers promote extreme ideologies; the channels El Naas and El Hafez are good examples of outlets where one can see the fundamentalist presence in full swing. Niqabbed women present shows, Wagdy Ghoneim threatens Christians, Abdullah Badr defames actresses, and fatwa fabricators deliver twisted and convoluted views of the Koran—all in the name of Islam and under the auspices of freedom of speech.

Freedom of speech is an intricate part of a free society, but in a society taking its first baby steps towards democracy, it can become a liability. Freedom of speech is still hotly disputed in liberal and secular democracies where arguments have crystallized around topics such as pornography and child sex abuse. Defending freedom of speech in such context is total rubbish.

Here Egyptians need strict laws to support the idea that we must prohibit people from attacking others in hateful ways. But of course to an extremist guided by what he or she believes is a God-given message to destroy the enemy, what is a hateful way? Hence what a secular society must do is draw absolute lines re protection of minority rights while at the same time proscribing hatefulness.

Media and freedom of speech will remain contested issues unless clear guidelines are set and followed.
It’s two years since the Jan 25th Revolution erupted in Tahrir. The changes, the twists and turns, and the upheavals remain unique to Egypt. Today, we look back and contemplate.

Egypt’s modern history will be shaped by the events that ensued during and following the Jan 25th Revolution. The 18 days in Tahrir will be remembered as the time when Egyptians united in a glorious precedent that exemplified the true Egyptian character. Egyptians rallied for their Egypt. The result: they ousted Mubarak; they changed the Egyptian course, and they broke the fear barrier.

Today’s two-year mark brought more protests to Cairo, Port Said, Alexandria, Suez, Mahala, and many other cities, for none of the awaited hopes and dreams have been achieved. And again, Egyptians died. Again, tear gas was in abundance. Again Egyptians remained angry and dissatisfied.

The chants that resonated in Tahrir and other squares all over Egypt were the same as two years back: “Bread, Freedom, and Social Justice,” “Leave, leave, leave” and “The people want the fall of the regime.” Nothing seems to have changed. Quite the contrary, it does look as though things have worsened.
One change for the better, however, lies in the fact that the fear barrier has fallen. In Egypt everyone today is free to say just about anything about anybody—no limits and no restrictions. Disappointingly, the respect barrier has fallen with it. There is a saying in Egypt—“If you don’t have an elder to follow, you buy yourself one.” Which translates to this: everyone needs someone to respect, appreciate, or emulate, or else things will turn chaotic. Today, this piece of wisdom is ignored or rejected. It appears that no one and nothing is worthy of respect.

Somehow, some way, and by some unfortunate stroke of events, the Revolution was stolen—right before the eyes of Egyptians. Those in power today are not those who stood their ground in Tahrir. Those leading, or shall we say misleading, the country are a different entity altogether.

Today’s Egypt isn’t faring well. In a short two-year span, Egypt has handed power over to the Islamists. The president; the Shura, the Upper House; the cabinet; the constitution; and the soon-to-be Parliament, the Lower House; are all in the hands of Islamists—Ikhwan and others.

This would have been tolerable had Islamists been able to forget their dissident underground mentality; but their inability to forego their years of suffering has made them unable to befriend, work with, or share with other Egyptians. Only one goal is worth the effort: power.

In the meantime, the challenges remain upfront and centre. First of all, the economy is on the brink of a complete meltdown. The Revolution first, the Islamists second. The ongoing mayhem has killed tourism. An average 12.5% of Egyptians are jobless. Prices of essential foodstuffs are at a record high, and the hungry are getting desperate.

Egypt awaits the five billion dollar loan from the IMF; and Morsi will have to impose severe austerity measures to satisfy the conditions of that loan. He will cut subsidies, increase taxes and devalue the pound to satisfy the IMF if necessary—all good reason for Egyptians to say enough is enough.

In the meantime, Qatar has come on as a strong player, and is about to complete a deal to buy out the NSGB Bank. The Qataris have also provided Egypt with two 2-billion-dollar loans; certainly Qatar will be dictating its conditions and terms in return for these loans. More
Qatari investments are headed towards the Suez Canal, raising concerns in many places, according to one writer in Al-Ahram, “including the military and intelligence, over the involvement of a foreign investor in an area of direct national security interest.”

Secondly, sectarian strife is alive and brewing—Islamists have given themselves rights to harm, threaten, evict, and kill, if necessary all those who don’t follow their route. This will change the make-up of Egypt, as we know it. It has become a fight over religion instead of a fight over rights. Long gone is the old Egypt, where neighbours and associates hardly recognized, or asked, which religion the others followed. Seriously at risk is Egypt as a secular state, with minority rights protected and freedom of religion a hallmark of the nation.

Thirdly, there is ongoing, seemingly never-ending tension in Sinai. Though the gas line bombings have subsided since Morsi took over, the worry re more terrorist attacks and raids remains a reality.

Egyptians are worried, perplexed, and fractured. They are worried about Sinai’s precarious situation, the Jihadists continuing their onslaught on Egyptians, the fluctuation of the economy, and the Islamists seizing Egypt.

Finally, seemingly on a lighter note but one that affects daily life in Cairo enormously, in the midst of these ongoing serious problems in the life of the nation, there’s Cairo traffic. One day soon traffic will halt; the severity will have people stranded amidst traffic for days unable to abandon their vehicles but unable to budge, either. Maybe then someone will really take the initiative and work on this seemingly unsolvable challenge to the business of moving around this gargantuan city. When traffic, for goodness’ sake, threatens our livelihood you know things aren’t getting any better.

Today’s Egypt is not any better than the Egypt of two years ago.

January 26, 2013: A verdict for some of the defendants in the Port Said massacre is out. Of the 75 defendants, 21 are sentenced to death.

Glossary of Arabic words and abbreviations used

Al hamdulelah: to thank God

Awad: to gain from loss; to ask for compensation re a loss suffered. Culturally frowned upon. “I won’t accept ‘awad,’” is a common phrase. If a loss is huge, say a kin dies in an accident, the family may repeat such a phrase meaning that nothing can compensate for their loss.

Baltageya: thugs

Bawab: janitor/custodian—every apartment building in Egypt has a bawab.

Corniche: the street along the Nile

Fatwa: a ruling on a point of Islamic law given by a recognized authority

Fawda: chaos

Feddan: a feddan is a unit of area used in agricultural Egypt.

Feloul: remnants of the old regime; could entail those who gained from the previous system or those who remain loyal to it.
“Fee kol shara’ fi baladi sout el horayia bey nadi”: “In every street in my country freedom is calling,” a song videotaped in Tahrir during the earlier days of the revolution.

Galabiya: a traditional Egyptian garment—loose and long

Hanem: a title bestowed upon upper class women, equivalent to Ma’am

Hezb el kanaba: literally “the couch sitters’ party”; the bystanders—those who remained aloof and distant throughout the revolution

Ikhwan: brothers—refers to the Muslim Brotherhood, an Egyptian Islamic organization that was established 80 years ago. It remains powerful in spite of the confrontations it faced with all previous Egyptian presidents. It came in to power with President Morsi.

Jizya: Under Islamic law, a jizya is a tax levied on non-Muslim citizens—does not exist today but was practised earlier on as Muslims conquered new territories.

Moulid: an annual religious festival marking the birthday of a religious person or saint

Niqab: a veil usually black that covers all of the face, apart of the eyes—of radical Islamic women

Raqm Qaumi: Egyptian ID Card

Salaf: of yonder years—from this emerged the Salafi movement, to believe in the ways of yesterday.

Salafis: Muslim fundamentalists who emphasize the salaf (the predecessors’ ways) as model examples

SCAF: Supreme Council of Armed Forces

Sira’ Fi Al-Mina: A Struggle along the Pier—an Egyptian movie filmed in 1954
Wasta: a person’s network; has a negative connotation; meaning getting something that you don’t deserve because you have “connections.”
Egyptian proverbs

“He wants a funeral where he can scream and shout”: to enjoy making a fuss, creating too much noise, and attracting attention.

“His bottom bare yet he shimmies to and fro”: when a person does not have the means or the ability to do something, yet he boasts about his intentions.

“The winds do not blow as ships desire them to”: courses and events don’t usually go the way one wants them to.

“How come you chose this bitterness? Response: I chose it because of what was bitterer”: a proverb used when a person has to choose one of two bad choices.

“Yesterday’s words are lathered with butter”: sliding off melted butter is easy; meaning what was said earlier is often forgotten.

“Squeeze a lemon”: By squeezing a lemon over the unpleasant concoction, you may manage to alleviate the bad taste. This proverb was repeated while Egyptians were choosing between the two presidential candidates—the run-off between Morsi and Shafik.
“If you don’t have an elder to follow, you buy yourself one.” This translates to this: everyone needs someone to respect, appreciate, or emulate, or else things will turn chaotic.
Key players

**Presidents**


Hosni Mubarak: Air force officer (1981—2011)

Mohammed Morsi: Engineer, Ph.D., (2011—….)

**SCAF (the Supreme Council of Armed Forces)**
Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi: Minister of Defense during Mubarak’s era; was Commander in Chief of SCAF: President Morsi retired Tantawi in August 2012.

Sami Anan: Chief of Staff of Egyptian Armed Forces. Was retired in August 2012.

**Prime Ministers:**
Ahmed Nazif: July 2004 to 29 January 2011


Essam Sharaf: March 3, 2011 to November 21, 2011
Kamal El Ganzouri: December 7, 2011, to August 2012

Hisham Qandil: August 2012—to date

**Parliamentarians**

Magy Mahrous: Ran for parliament seat in 2011—did not win. Liberal.

Mahmoud Salem: Ran for parliament seat in 2011—did not win. Liberal.

Azza El Garf: one of the few women MP elected; openly supports archaic Islamic guidelines and female genital mutilation (FGM).

Mamdouh Ismail: Salafi MP. Gained notoriety when he improvised parliament oath and added “according to God’s law,” and later when he recited the call for prayers mid assembly session.

Saad El Katatni: Islamist, parliament speaker until the parliament’s dissolution

Amr Hamzawy: MP for Heliopolis. Liberal

**Presidential candidates**

Hazim Abou Ismail: Salafi presidential candidate who was barred from running because his mother held dual citizenship: Egyptian and American.

Mansour Hassan: Liberal presidential candidate, who decided not to run earlier on in race. Has since died.

Buthaina Kamel: a Tahrir activist and the only female presidential candidate. Could not get enough support to pursue the candidacy.

Selim El Awa: Islamic presidential candidate

Key players

Omar Suleiman: Became Mubarak’s first Vice-President; took over reign after Mubarak was toppled, ran in Egypt’s presidential election. Died in July 2012.

Ahmed Shafik: Served as Mubarak’s last Prime Minister; remained in office for less than a month; ran in first round and second presidential rounds. Conceded in June 2012 to President Morsi.

Hamdeen Sabbahi: Socialist presidential candidate; member of the National Salvation Front that aimed at revoking the constitution referendum and the Constitution Assembly.

Amr Moussa: Minister of Foreign Affairs (Mubarak’s era), former Head of the Arab League, presidential candidate, member of the National Salvation Front

Mohammed El Baradei: Director General of International Atomic Energy Agency; Coordinator of the National Salvation Front
Three 20th century Egyptian leaders—Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak—shaped today’s Egypt, but their regimes left much to be desired politically, socially, and economically. In 2011, the January 25 Revolution promised a better future calling for “Bread, Freedom, and Social Justice.”

Cairo Rewind 2011—2013 recounts the events of the revolution against the Mubarak regime and the cataclysms that followed.

Through the eyes of Egyptian-born Azza Sedky, the book recaptures the day-to-day excitement, and the disappointment of Egyptians throughout the largely peaceful revolution. Starting with the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, then the election of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Morsi and finally the referendum to determine the fate of Morsi’s new constitution, the book recalls events as they occurred.

Individual articles, written throughout the two-year period since the first Tahrir protest, track the development of the revolution. The articles began as blog posts. As history, the posts give a sense of immediacy to past events. As commentary, the book reflects a moderate’s vision of a secular Egyptian society whose very fragility has allowed the rise of a power group, which, by means of democratic processes, threatens to undermine the civic rights that democracies are meant to uphold.

Dr. Azza Sedky is an Egyptian-born Canadian who was in Egypt in January 2011, when protesters first occupied Tahrir Square.

Cairo Rewind gives us an insider’s view of what it was like to live through the days of Egypt’s revolution.

Azza Sedky’s perspective is that of a liberal skeptical of revolution, a non-fundamentalist Muslim fearful of extremism, and of an Egyptian proud of the long history of a deeply civil Egyptian society. Sedky attended Ain Shams University in Cairo, graduating with a doctorate in English Literature, to follow her father’s academic footsteps. An Arabic speaker by birth, she taught English at Kuwait University before immigrating with her husband, son and daughter to Vancouver in the 1980s, where she taught first at the University of British Columbia and then at Capilano University. Many of her family members remain in Egypt.

Azza Sedky lives in North Vancouver with her husband and spends several months each year in Cairo.