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Democracy is our revenge

The leaders of this revolt were tortured alongside me.

BY MAAJID NAWAZ
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The uprising in Egypt is unprecedented, fascinating, even scary - but it is also more than that. For me, it's personal. I was "Number 42" in the dungeons of Hosni Mubarak's torture facilities. Before me were 41 poor souls, taken one by one and electrocuted. Behind me were hundreds more. Wives were stripped and tortured in front of their husbands, children electrocuted in front of their parents. Few returned from the darkness of Cairo's al-Gihaz and Lazoughly cells.

Between 2002 and 2006, I was swallowed up by this system. I was held in the Mazra Tora Prison for my role as leader of the pan-Islamist organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir in Alexandria. I have since left that group and now campaign for democratic activism in Muslim-majority countries. That is why I see this people's uprising as my revenge.

Once taken in, most detainees were interned indefinitely. I shared cells with prisoners who had been languishing for more than 20 years without so much as being charged. At one point, the prison population peaked at over 25,000. Some faced 15-year sentences but, on completing their term, they would be reprocessed. Hardly any were released.

I was imprisoned in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks, when Egypt's state security was rounding people up in unprecedented numbers. I shared cells and broke bread with the Who's Who of the current uprising in Egypt, from former jihadists and serving Islamists to liberal reformers and those convicted for homosexuality. Muslims who had converted to Christianity, Christians who had converted to Islam - all were detained for daring to express a desire to break with the status quo.

I would take daily walks around the prison courtyard with Ayman Nour, leader of the liberal opposition Hizb el-Ghad. He ran against Mubarak in the 2005 elections and was rewarded with a seven-year sentence. Nour was also from a Hizb ut-Tahrir background; he helped me think beyond Islamism and conceive of a life campaigning for an inclusive politics. As the January protests began, I called him to pass on my good wishes; he has played an important role in the uprising.

I remember, too, discussing jumlukiyya, or monocracy, with Saad el-Din Ibrahim, professor of sociology at the American University in Cairo. He had been detained for writing that Mubarak's son Gamal should not be allowed to succeed his father. In overcrowded cells, I debated the intricacies of Islamist political theory and history with Muhammad al-Badi, the present Murshid al-'Am, or leader of the Muslim Brotherhood. Other prominent figures from the Brotherhood were also there: the then spokesman Essam el-Erian and the key reformer Abdel Moneim Abul-Fotouh.

Another man worthy of mention is Ahmed Seif el-Islam Hamad. This veteran activist and leader of the Kifaya ("enough is enough") movement was my lawyer. Kifaya pioneered the anti-Mubarak protests five years ago. In those days, they could not muster more than 20 or so demonstrators and those who did stand up were the object of sneering from onlookers. Now over 60, Seif is happy to step back and let the youth lead their own people's revolution.

But still, the old guard repeats its tired, fear-mongering arguments that either Egypt is accepted by the west as a police state or the country will fall into the hands of Islamist extremists. In a recent radio debate, I challenged the former UN secretary general Boutros Boutros-Ghali on this point. He argued that Mubarak was the only obstacle keeping Egypt from a takeover by the Brotherhood. Yet the sheer range of people I met in prison and events of the past few weeks convince me that this is a false choice. Take the secular and democratic April 6 Youth Movement, led by Ahmed Salah, which was instrumental in galvanising the masses. Significantly, the Brotherhood was not involved in sparking this uprising. Rather, it has played catch-up.

This was a spontaneous uprising. The best revolutions are unplanned and the most democratic are leaderless. Egypt has fast become the case study for the phenomenon - it is nothing short of a democratic cyclone that will rip through the entire Arab world. The Arab awakening has begun.

There are legitimate concerns that the Brotherhood, Egypt's most organised political opposition, could eventually hijack the uprising. The Brotherhood is an evolving organisation, but it has yet to ditch some of its more archaic principles, such as the view that only a Muslim male may become head of state. Its most recent internal elections led to defeat for reformers such as Abul-Fotouh.

Yet a takeover by the Brotherhood is not only undesirable but also unlikely. Its leadership will know how unpopular a takeover attempt would make them. The Brotherhood also lacks a unifying figurehead to compete with the likes of Mohamed ElBaradei, Ayman Nour or Amr Moussa, the former leader of the Arab

League. What we are witnessing is a new kind of uprising. The young people driving this revolution have no time for old Egypt, steeped in colonial dichotomies and run by octogenarian leaders such as Mubarak and the Brotherhood's Badi.

Future elections could throw up any one of many leaders-in-waiting. It may just be that the Egypt we see in a month's time will be unrecognisable from the one of the past 30 years.

Mubarak's Egypt perfected the art of torture without leaving a mark. His rule terrorised an entire population into silence. His government basked in the lavish attention of western leaders while Egyptian Islamists, communists and democrats all lived in fear. Now it's game over for him and his regime.

Maajid Nawaz is co-founder of the anti-extremist group Quilliam

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SUN, 2012-04-15 18:22 — DOUGLASSBISHOP

I am glad you support the revoutions and the democracy. However you are not Egyptian, and your experience in Egyptian prison is not on the same rank as those whom you mention: arrested tortured and silenced IN THEIR OWN COUNTRY. I would really like to read your opinions on the Egyptian situation if you would leave yourself out of it, as it seems (perhaps unintentionally) that you are seeking to claim some share in what the heroes of Tahrir are doing right now.
http://www.medicaldebtsconsolidation.com/

SAT, 2011-02-05 09:49 — WINNIETHEPOOH

Note Mr. Nawaaz that there is no harsh criticism of the West's blind support for Egypt's dictatorship or of the media spin and hype, fed by the Governments of the West. If Egypt stopped serving the interests of the West it woud be labelled 'extremist' - isn't this a form of extremist secular imperialism. This article would have greater credibility of that element was addressed.Don't want to bite the hand that feeds you?

WED, 2011-02-09 09:08 — TIM (NOT VERIFIED)

It's hard to take Nawaz (and his little buddy Ed Hussein) seriously on these issues when they're really sell outs, in the back pocket to the whims of neocons and the Israeli Lobby.

"Mustn't tell the Westerners want they don't want to hear (or criticise Israel) otherwise we might lose our £70k p.a. salary." Whenever MPs criticise Quillam you should assume they've spoken against

Israel et al.

SAT, 2011-02-05 13:38 — KIKATRIXX

With my deepest respect Mr Nawaz, I am glad you support the revoutions and the democracy. However you are not Egyptian, and your experience in Egyptian prison is not on the same rank as those whom you mention: arrested tortured and silenced IN THEIR OWN COUNTRY. I would really like to read your opinions on the Egyptian situation if you would leave yourself out of it, as it seems (perhaps unintentionally) that you are seeking to claim some share in what the heroes of Tahrir are doing right now. The best and greatest thing you can do is continue to pressure the UK govt to support the revolution and preferably to freeze the Mubarak assets in the UK.

FRI, 2011-02-04 15:50 — SUBURBANMONK

well done brothers and sistors I hope this sparks not just a revolution for freedom in the Arab world but also in the west where corruption and epathy has led to a false democracy which covers up the failed country of britian and others.Viva La revolution!!!

FRI, 2011-02-04 16:34 — EZLN (NOT VERIFIED)

"Todos aquellos pueblos, todos esos que trabajan la tierra, a los que nosotros invitamos que se reúnan a nuestro lado y nosotros daremos la vida a una sola lucha, para que nosotros andemos con ayuda de vosotros."

Cuarta Declaración de la Selva Lacandona

FRI, 2011-02-04 17:38 — XXXXXX (NOT VERIFIED)

Amr Moussa is still the leader of the Arab league.

FRI, 2011-02-04 18:11 — PERIPETON (NOT VERIFIED)

What an inspiring article, what an inspiring revolution. You and your peers are changing the conscience of humanity. We are forever grateful.

Build a world without leaders and leaded. Without messiahs and without oppression. Justice can only be possible when we all participate in the governance.

FRI, 2011-02-04 19:16 — DR. ABDUL QADEER (NOT VERIFIED)

Maajid Nawaz has no reliability in Pakistan. He is a well known sell out....

SAT, 2011-02-05 00:04 — ABDULLAH (NOT VERIFIED)

Maajid Nawaz has no credibility whatsoever. Continually flip flopping from one extreme to another. He's misleading in that says what he thinks the West wants to hear, in the hope of continuing to receive govt grants and funds. He is milking the system for what he can get.

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