

# Broken façade of fear

By Alexander Hanna

Middle East  
Egypt - up

MORE than a week after it began, the Egyptian uprising isn't showing any signs of abating. Members of the Central Security Forces were disarmed when attempting to engage demonstrators and replaced by committees of citizens directing traffic and safeguarding neighbourhoods.

The headquarters of Hosni Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP) have gone up in flames in most major cities, left to burn by the people and a seemingly sympathetic army. Egyptians have set up semi-permanent camps in the aptly named Tahrir (Liberation) Square and become its guardians — even its cleaners, brooms in hand.

They now wait for their single demand to be met: that Mubarak and his cronies pack their bags and join the deposed dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the former president of Tunisia, in Jeddah.

To casual observers of Egypt, this seemed to come out of nowhere. Three months ago parliamentary elections were held in which the NDP won over 93 per cent of the vote. Of course the elections were rigged, but complacency followed. There was no outcry, no mass protest, no call to expel Mubarak or stage a repeat of Iran's 2009 Green Movement. Pyramids were still visited, Europeans still vacationed in Sharm El Sheikh.

But then Tunisia happened. The now well-worn narrative of frustrated college graduate Mohammed Bouazizi, the 26-year-old who set himself on fire to protest his inability to make a living, set his hometown of Sidi Bouzid alight and with it the rest of the country.

In light of Tunisia's revolution, the question floating through the Egyptian mind became, 'If in Tunisia, why not here?'

And why not, when Egypt shared so much of the same tinder, waiting for the spark, that pre-revolution Tunisia had? Both countries enjoy a glut of unemployed or underemployed youth, rising inflation, and strong restrictions on

a 28-year-old beaten to death by state security in a cyber cafe in June 2010. Pictures of his mutilated face were posted widely on blogs and other social media, fuelling the rising outrage against police brutality.

Said became an icon of the Jan 25 demonstrations, with a series of popular cartoons depicting his ubiquitous visage, the Jan25 Twitter hashtag imprinted on his shirt. In one cartoon he's picking up a malcontent Mubarak by the scruff of his suit jacket; in another, he is yelling "Wake up Egypt!" to a distraught Interior Minister Habib el-Adly, who is kneeling and covering his ears.

But Tunisia was needed, dearly needed. Tunisia was the first to throw off the shackles of fear, to pierce the facade of reprisal in the face of dissent. Tunisia was the necessary leap of faith that a popular uprising could remove decades of oppression.

And almost overnight, the Egyptian veil of fear has been lifted. Activists against police brutality gathering under the name of Said and members of the April 6 Youth Movement called for a 'Day of Anger' on Jan 25 — a date usually celebrated to commemorate a 1952 British attack on a police station that helped precipitate Nasser's revolution — to protest police brutality, corruption, poverty and unemployment. Since then, protests in the capital, which in the past only gathered hundreds of the same activists, have brought out in droves thousands who would otherwise not have come out.

On the night of the 25th demonstrators occupied Tahrir Square, establishing a carnival atmosphere in which they planned to camp, chanting "we want the regime out" and drafting a loose consensus statement before state security dispersed them with tear gas in the early morning hours.

Over the past several days, Egyptians have demonstrated in the face of police crack-downs, plain-clothes police

---

Despite the lack of order, Egyptians are finally feeling free.

---

Egypt shared so much of the same tinder, waiting for the spark, that pre-revolution Tunisia had? Both countries enjoy a glut of unemployed or underemployed youth, rising inflation, and strong restrictions on the freedoms of press and assembly. Mubarak plays the political strongman akin to Ben Ali, with their NDP and the Constitutional Democratic Rally, respectively, quashing dissent. Save for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, even the organised political opposition looks similarly weak.

But grievances do not make a revolution. Nor, as many rightly point out, is Egypt the same country as Tunisia. It is the most populous nation in the Arab world and holds a central place in the power configuration between the US and Israel, receiving a nontrivial amount of military aid from the former.

It has put that aid money to use arming its state security forces to the teeth. And, to steal a comparison from *The Arabist's* Issandr el-Amrani, Mubarak has the hard-headedness of a *gamoosa* (water buffalo) as compared to Ben Ali's vacillations between the carrot and the stick prior to his ouster.

With regard to the political opposition, trade unions found a strong leadership position in the street protests of Tunisia while the official (essentially government-controlled) Egyptian Trade Union Federation called for member syndicates to actively dissuade its members from protesting.

But perhaps this conversation is moot. In some ways, Egypt didn't need the flames of Tunisia to light the kindling. It had its own Mohammed Bouazizi in Khaled Said,

## Despite the lack of order, Egyptians are finally feeling free.

---

acting as agent provocateurs and military shows of intimidation and the outright gunning down of unarmed civilians. The demonstrations have only escalated, resulting in a (largely ignored) military-enforced curfew and a near-complete shutdown of the Internet and SMS and mobile-phone services.

Despite the lack of order, uncertainty, restrictions on communication, violence and destruction, Egyptians are reporting that they are finally feeling free. It has now become a waiting match between the people and the aging Mubarak, who almost seems completely oblivious to their demands.

The 'concession' of appointing spy chief Omar Suleiman as vice president and Minister of Aviation Ahmed Shafik as prime minister hasn't appeased anyone but American cable news outlets obsessed with the idiosyncrasies of personality. But this is all shuffling deck chairs on the Titanic.

Tunisia has been a source of awe and inspiration, and a fair warning to regimes that believe they can continue their programmes of intimidation and repression. Already similar days of anger have been planned for Sudan, Yemen, Algeria, Syria and Bahrain. Let's hope the Saudis have enough room to accommodate several more dictators. ■

*The writer is a PhD candidate studying social movements in the Middle East and their use of social media.*