

Interview With

Khaled Elshami*

Post Mubarak Egypt: Historic Changes and Challenges

By Salwa Al Khatib**

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n 25 January 2011—Thousands of Egyptians took to the streets to demand an end to President Hosni Mubarak's rule. In a country where emergency law has been in place for 30 years along with the President such scenes were unprecedented.

In what is now a historic moment in history, Egypt's youth used the New Media to form a "Day of Wrath" of anti-government demonstrations inspired by the downfall of Tunisia's President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali only a day earlier on January 14.

For the next three weeks Tahrir Square in Egypt's Capital Cairo became the focal point of the world's attention, as the people of Egypt rose to a unanimous revolt against a regime that had for too long stripped them of democracy, human rights and freedom of speech.

For millions of Egyptians what took place on the streets of Cairo, Alexandria and all over the streets of their country was an unimaginable dream; a peo-



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ple defying their (US backed and supported) dictator with nothing but their bodies, willing to die for a freedom that most of the youth had never even known.

For as long as Mubarak was in power many in Egypt were secretly angered by his corrupt rule but remained silent out of the fear that his dictatorship had instilled in them. Their silence combined with Mubarak's corruption, theft of billions of dollars from the country's wealth, unquestionable support for Israel and the closing of the Rafah border humiliated the Egyptian people in the region, and at the time many renowned political analysts proclaimed that Egyptians were 'too accustomed and afraid to defy their government'.

Few Egyptian voices in defiance of Mubarak were heard during his rule. Those who refused to be silenced did so at the detriment of their own safety.

Opposition groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Kiefya (Arabic for Enough!) spent more time being tortured in jails than campaigning for freedom. But though their voices were few and far between, it now appears that they had reached the hearts and minds of many Egyptians, who had listened to their cry for freedom but were too afraid to join in.

It was particularly difficult for journalists in Egypt whose job description commands that they report to their readers what is taking place in their country. Journalism in Egypt under the former dictatorship became nothing more than a sound bite, an extension of government propaganda.

One of the Egyptian voices that had long called for democratic change in his country is Khaled Elshami. In fact in an ironic turn of events, Elshami had a Television programme only two days prior to the uprising in Egypt titled, Suicide or Revolt? In which he described the Egyptian people as being on the verge of a revolt.

Here he talks to me about the great changes that are facing the Egyptian people Post Revolution and how they can make the transitional process from emergency law and corruption to a long awaited and much deserved democracy.

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CESRAN: As the political editor of an Arabic Newspaper (Al Quds Al Arabi) you have been reporting the historic events taking place in Egypt and the whole of the Middle East region, what can your ongoing close observation of Egyptian affairs tell us about the current movements we are seeing in the new Egypt?

Khaled Elshami: Egypt is witnessing some major political, social and economic changes following its historic revolution last month.

The power of the people, particularly the new youth movements armed with new media, is setting the agenda and actively playing a significant role in shaping the new political regime following decades of stagnation.

There are tens of new political parties expected to form in the next few months, transforming the political scene and giving voices to the vast

majority of the people who have been muzzled since the end of the Monarchy rule in 1952.

CESRAN: Is it viable to expect old and newly formed political parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood who have been hunted and oppressed by the previous regime to suddenly rise up to the challenges Egypt now faces?

Khaled Elshami: The strong and well organised Muslim Brotherhood group is set to form a political party called 'freedom and justice' probably inspired by the, justice and development party in Turkey. This was unimaginable only two months ago, as Mubarak regime made it unconstitutional to form a political party on religious ground.

Fears of an "extreme Islamic regime" to be established in Egypt are baseless.

For some reason, some western governments and news outlets find it of relevance to compare the Iranian revolution when assessing the situation in Egypt.

Looking at photos of millions of Egyptians in the streets during the revolution, no political party or ideological group could be identified, as the awakening of Egyptian national spirit has occupied the centre and marginalised all political entities.

Unlike most of the Arab world, Egypt is enjoying a vibrant civil society and a strong independent media that played a major role in bringing down Mubarak regime, one of the oldest and most stubborn dictatorships in the world.

CESRAN: What is the daily situation now in Egypt?

Khaled Elshami: The continuing absence of the regular police force has created a security vacuum in which sectarian violence, robbery and sexual harassment are on the increase.

The Egyptian state seems to face a serious challenge of keeping its integrity, with its inability to force law and order, as many police officers are either unable or unwilling to go back to work, fearing being subjected to humiliation or assault by the public in revenge for almost four hundred youth and six thousands injured during the revolution by the security central forces.

The Armed forces Security Council that is ruling the country seems to be overwhelmed by the wide spread unrest, demonstrations that are continuing even after allowing the revolution youth to appoint their favourite choice as a prime minister.

The unusual weakness of the Post Mubarak state is inviting more protests, of which, some are thought to be orchestrated to break the spirit of the revolution, and force the people to accept that some of its demands may not be achievable.

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Nevertheless the battle of democratisation in Egypt is far too important to be compared with other regional struggle for change. Egypt is the heart of the Arab world and a historic source of inspiration to the region.

A sustainable democratic regime in Egypt is likely to lead eventually to a long awaited for new Middle- East that is more democratic and respectful of human rights, a development would dramatically impact some international conflicts and global powers interests.

CESRAN: What parties or individuals do you believe to currently be most resistant to the revolt and the current transitional process?

Khaled Elshami: Many people in Egypt fear that there are counter-revolution dark forces in operation to undermine the credibility of the Post Mubarak regime. Knowing that they have no place in the NEW EGYPT, wealthy businessmen that worked closely with Gamal Mubarak, the son of the ex president in the ruling NDP party, and senior officers in the much feared and empowered state security police who lost a lot by the fall of Mubarak are believed to be behind the counter revolution.

CESRAN: Are Egyptians hopeful of the future?

Khaled Elshami: Mubarak regime was a perfect example of how slow and painful democratisation could be. With its fall Egypt has taken a major step toward democracy, but the path is surly long and costly.

After thirty years of implementing emergency law by Mubarak, in which fear, corruption, mistrust of the state and disrespect of human rights have become a culture, a massive amount of work is needed to rebuild the people and the state.

As elsewhere, after celebrations of the newly born democracy ends, the real questions will soon begin whether a democratic regime can deliver in very difficult circumstances as the economy is shaking and social insecurity is increasing.

Education and health services have collapsed under Mubarak and in need of huge investments for the people to taste the fruit of change. Alongside with unemployment that has gone out of control forcing thousands of new graduates to migrate every year, restoring the Economy is an uphill task to the emerging regime in Egypt.

Notes:

* **Khaled Elshami** is an Egyptian independent researcher and journalist. He is currently the political editor of Alquds Alarabi, pan Arab newspaper in London and presenter of (Awraq Misrya) (Egyptian papers) program on Al Hiwar TV based in UK. He was born in Egypt and educated both in Egypt and UK, He was granted MSc in international conflicts by Kingston University in UK.

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