

Veteran Egypt activist sees revolution as ongoing

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CAIRO (AP) — He organized his first demonstration while still a student in 1998, then got arrested and tortured by Egyptian police two years later at age 23. Now he has seen the fall of the president he spent his adult life struggling against.

For 33-year-old activist Hossam el-Hamalawy, though, Egypt's three-week youth revolution is by no means over — there remains a repressive state to be dismantled and workers who need to get their rights.

"The job is unfinished, we got rid of (Hosni) Mubarak but we didn't get rid of his dictatorship, we didn't get rid of the state security police," he told The Associated Press while sipping strong Arabic coffee in a traditional downtown cafe that weeks before had been the scene of street battles.

The activism career of el-Hamalawy typifies the long, and highly improbable, trajectory of the mass revolt that ousted Mubarak, Egypt's long-entrenched leader. Once a dreamer organizing more or less on his own, el-Hamalawy's dreams suddenly hardened into reality. The next step, he says, is the Egyptian people must press their advantage.

"This is phase two of the revolution," said el-Hamalawy, who works as a journalist for an English-language online Egyptian paper and runs the Arabawy blog, a clearing house for information on the country's fledgling independent labor movement — a campaign that has become increasingly assertive since the fall of the old government.

For years, activists in Egypt planted seeds — sometimes separately, sometimes in coordination — building networks and pushing campaigns on specific causes. They fought lonely fights : anti-war protests here, labor strikes there, an effort to raise awareness about police abuse, another to organize "Keep Our City Clean" trash collection.

Then one day in late January, it all came together for them. They were part of a movement, hundreds of thousands strong.

For three weeks, el-Hamalawy fought regime supporters and manned the barricades in Tahrir Square, but unlike the youth leaders who have come to prominence in the aftermath of the uprising, he refuses to talk to the generals now ruling Egypt and fears the uprising's momentum is being lost as everyone waits for the military to transition the country to a new government.

"Activists can take some rest from the protest and go back to their well-paying jobs for six months, waiting for the military to give us salvation, but the worker can't go back to his factory and still get paid 250 pounds," he said, referring to the wave of labor unrest sweeping the country as workers protest their abysmal wages.

"The strikes now will continue, that's our only hope at the moment, the mission is not accomplished," el-Hamalawy said, sardonically echoing the triumphant tweet of one youth leader when Mubarak stepped down.

Only a few years ago, activists could hardly dream that their actions might bring down the president and they rarely dared say it out loud. Those that did, like el-Hamalawy, were mocked as crazy dreamers.

When he went to interview for his first job after graduate school, about a decade ago at a local English-language magazine, he told the editor this was just a side show to his main goal of overthrowing the regime.

The editor laughed but hired him anyway, often ridiculing his idealism and notions of popular revolution in the newsroom.

Now, however, el-Hamalawy's vision of a vibrant labor movement shaking the country seems to be coming to pass — at least temporarily. Despite increasingly severe warnings from the generals running the show, factory workers and government employees across the country are hitting the streets.

Egypt's long-suppressed labor movement found a voice in December 2006, when the 26,000 workers at Mahalla Spinning and Weaving, north of Cairo, went on strike. The government acquiesced to their demands, but soon flurries of copy cat strikes were erupting across the country at other public and private sector factories.

El-Hamalawy was first covering the disturbances as a journalist, then helping to mobilize them as an activist, working with veteran shop floor leaders at the factories to help organize the laborers and, most importantly, get their message out to the rest of the world.

In the ensuing years, workers took up the mantle of challenging the status quo, after the crushing security presence in the big cities had largely suffocated the street protests that were once active in the first half of the decade.

"Because of my involvement in the labor movement I was playing the role of their international spokesperson in cases," he said, speaking the fluent English he gained from an education at the elite American University in Cairo. "The tax collectors were joking that I was their strike's foreign minister."

Raised in the middle class suburb of Nasr City by an academic father and an artist mother, el-Hamalawy is a long way from working class, but he says labor organizers have welcomed his advice and help in their struggles.

El-Hamalawy maintains that it was the eruption of strikes in the final days of the Tahrir Square uprising that prompted the generals to finally push out Mubarak after the protest seemed to have degenerated into a waiting game.

Those strikes are certainly a long way from his modest first protest, which was groundbreaking in its own way. El-Hamalawy convinced a few hundred AUC students to protest the 1998 U.S. bombing of Iraq by marching off campus, something students hadn't done in decades. They were greeted by baton-wielding riot police.

It was hard to say who was more surprised — the police that the elite students would leave the safety of their campus or the students themselves when security forces had the temerity to hit them.

In those early days, protests could only be about foreign policy issues, and denouncing Mubarak was still a long way off. Over the next 10 years there was a gradual shift to from foreign to domestic issues.

"I still remember I would be chanting against Mubarak and there would be people silencing me, (saying) 'Don't get us in trouble,'" el-Hamalawy recalled.

His activism finally brought him to the attention of the country's dreaded State Security, and one night in 2000 while was driving with his girlfriend, el-Hamalawy was cut off by two cars and snatched.

Agents blindfolded him with his own Palestinian protest scarf, tied his hands behind his back and took him to their downtown headquarters where he remained for four days.

He refused to answer their questions, and like so many activists before him, he was tortured and threatened with rape, electric shocks and deprived of sleep.

"I would say I'm not going to speak and they would keep on beating me. Then they stripped off my clothes completely and they said I'm going to bring a gay soldier to rape you now," he recalled.

El-Hamalawy said he never did talk and was eventually released. He was taken twice more in the ensuing years, including in 2003 while walking with two American journalists in the aftermath of the anti-war protests.

"The whole thing just damages you," he said. "I couldn't go to bed from three to five in the morning for years," because that's when the police raids would come.

Rather than discourage him, though, the beatings solidified his resolve that the regime had to be brought down, and over the years even as he drifted from job to job, the late night blogging and labor organizing continued.

His gaunt frame shows the effects of a sustained diet of coffee, cigarettes and no sleep. He looks much older than his years with gray shooting through his close-cropped curly hair and dark circles under his eyes.

His handsome face, however, still splits into a brilliant smile, energized by what's at least a partial victory against a regime that had seemed unbeatable.

"It's easy to talk about (the beatings) now because I feel I partially took my revenge against those police officers," he said. "Since the police withdrew on that Friday, my mother has been saying, 'Now I have revenge for my son.'"

El-Hamalawy's zeal has mellowed little over the years, and just like when he was talking about overthrowing the regime 10 years before it happened, his demands today seem a bit unrealistic — like investigating the now-ruling generals for their own links to corruption in the Mubarak era.

But then a decade ago, no one would have thought Egypt's quiescent workers and civil servants would be taking to the streets.

"There is a revolutionary mood in the country and you need to push for those strikes," he said. "If you hold them back now we are actually screwed — those who carry out half a revolution dig their own graves."

El-Hamalawy was quoting Louis Antoine Saint Just of the French Revolution, a choice that carries an historical warning of its own. Together with Robespierre, Saint Juste was executed in 1794 in the conservative backlash against the revolutionary reign of terror they initiated.

By PAUL SCHEMM

P.-S.

* From Daily Caller, 5:03 AM 02/19/2011 :

<http://dailycaller.com/2011/02/19/veteran-egypt-activist-sees-revolution-as-ongoing/#ixzz1EcoAhlMl>