

How Egyptian Women Took Back the Street Between Two “Black Wednesdays”: A First Person Account

Wednesday 2 April 2014, by [RADWAN Noha](#) (Date first published: 20 February 2014).

On February 16, Roger Ebert, an American film critic and commentator, tweeted: “The attack on Lara Logan brings Middle East attitudes toward women into sad focus.” While the attack on CBS News correspondent Lara Logan was a tragic and upsetting event, it needs to be understood in its political context. Any attempt to propound this in such familiar orientalist terms would be offensive and unfair, not only to Egyptians protesting for democracy, but to Logan herself. She was not attacked as a woman—although the gendered nature of the assault is indisputable; she was attacked as a professional journalist and a supporter of the Egyptian protest. I, too, was attacked, probably by the same type of thugs who attacked Logan. I understand both attacks in light of Egypt’s political conditions and the role of the Egyptian women in an ongoing struggle against oppressive and undemocratic government. The heinous attacks mark much more than “attitudes towards women.” Perhaps they mark the desperation of a dying regime.

My first day on Tahrir square was Saturday, January 29, the day following the (Friday) “day of rage,” which ended in the imposition of curfew in Egypt. Over the next week, I went to the square every day, all day, and spent nights at the apartment of a female journalist and an old friend of mine. Because Nagla’s apartment was so proximate to the square, it became “uprising central,” providing living space for eight other female friends and relatives. When I arrived at the square that Saturday, it was packed. Chanters were standing shoulder to shoulder and the chants could be heard a mile away: “The people want to bring down the regime.” I was struck not only by the ubiquitous female presence on the square but the integration of the female chanters in the crowd. Every once in a while, one or the other of the women would even lead: “Isma’ kilmit masr el-hurra, Ya Mubarak itla’ barra.” (Listen to free Egypt, Mubarak, get out.) And their chants would be repeated by thousands of followers.

This was truly “free Egypt.” Women and men were participating as equals in the ousting of the dictatorship whose repressive measures and failed policies have fueled extremism, sectarian violence and a wave of sexual harassment that often have made women’s presence in Egyptian public spaces a risk best avoided.

Over the past few years, reports of women, both veiled and unveiled, becoming subjects of physical as well as verbal sexual harassment have filled the Egyptian media and online blogs and websites. Most notorious was the mob attacks on women in downtown Cairo during the celebration of Eid al-Fitr (the post-Ramadan Muslim holiday) in 2006. Women in Cairo, and in the suburbs, on the metro and in busses were frequently the target of sexual slurs and abuses, and were touched, grabbed and molested in broad daylight. According to a report by the National Council for Human Rights in Egypt, 83 percent of Egypt’s working females have been victims of sexual harassment at one time or another. Yet on Tahrir Square in 2011, there was no fear of sexual harassment. Even at times when space was at a premium and everyone was crammed together, the men on Tahrir went out of their way to assure the women of their safety from any form of harassment and provocation. I thought about the aforementioned report’s investigations into the reasons why men sexually abuse women on

the streets of Egypt. The desire to exercise and prove their “manliness” was among the top reasons cited. Perhaps the men in Tahrir had nothing to prove. They had faced police forces shooting live ammunition. They were surrounded by army tanks, stilled for the moment, but still unpredictable and threatening.

Every day I went to Tahrir, I wore blue jeans and a light shirt with a jacket or sweater. My friends wore jeans, slacks and skirts. None of us covered our hair. On the square we sat next to women who wore western clothes and covered their hair, others who wore head scarves that were large enough to drape over their chests and back down to their waists. Some had their faces covered in the full niqab. We shared space and conversation, food and drink. Some of my friends smoked, others did not. At prayer times, some of the women joined in the prayers and others did not. On Tahrir, a woman’s religion, whether Islam or Christianity, and her piety were irrelevant. What mattered was that we were there, protesting a regime that has impoverished, marginalized or terrorized millions of Egyptians—women and men. Off the square, I was asked if it was true that the women brought food for the protesters. Yes they did. I brought food to the square. And I was offered food by other women, and by other men. But women did other things as well. Women physicians volunteered in the makeshift clinic on a side street. Women lawyers gave speeches on the square’s makeshift radio. Women were part of the “security” team searching incomers to the square to identify and exclude saboteurs carrying weapons. Women sat in front of the tanks to prevent their movement. We felt strong, empowered and united, aligned with each other and with the male protesters. Come what may, we had taken back the streets.

Black Wednesday

On February 2, the regime once again showed its ugly face and resorted to its old repertoire of violence that included attacks against women. But it was too late. This is not only what I think in retrospect, but what I knew at the start of that day that soon came to be called “Black Wednesday.” That morning, I arrived at the square early. A maudlin speech by President Mubarak the night before in which he promised to step down at the end of his term, and appealed to the Egyptians to let him die at home, had left opinions somewhat divided. “What’s another few months,” some said. “But he cannot be trusted. An unfinished revolution is a prelude for disaster,” said others. The speech was followed by small sporadic “pro-Mubarak” rallies, which were more farcical than disconcerting. Judging by the impunity with which these “supporters” broke curfew in the middle of the night, there is no doubt that they were on the streets upon the directives of the president or other members of the regime. Yet the difference of opinion among us at “uprising central” was real and disconcerting. I wanted to think the situation through, and I thought the square was an ideal place for that.

On my way to Tahrir, I ran into a group of “Mubarak supporters.” In my newly found Tahrir spirit, I walked up to one of them and asked: “How can you support a brutal and corrupt president?” He replied, “He said he was going to carry out reforms.” He added, “These protestors are paid,” thus repeating the lies propagated by the state controlled media. “Paid or not, how can you trust someone to suddenly turn good after thirty years of repression?” I asked. “There are no guarantees.” I knew I was not going to get through to this man, but I was hoping for the sympathy of bystanders. I could see one of them nodding his head to my words. But the president’s “supporter” was not going to give up. He retorted, “Why don’t you go home, bitch?” The stark return of a gendered slur surprised and angered me. Why was I surprised? I said, “Do what you wish, I am going back to the protests,” and I left.

On the square, the first person I met was a woman who had spent the night there as part of the ongoing sit-in. I had never seen her before but I sat next to her, and told her what had just happened. She offered me a cigarette. “They can say what they want. We came here for a reason.

We want Mubarak to step down, and we will not leave till he does." I felt much better. I walked around the square, chatted and chanted and was soon joined by many friends. They brought reports of an increasing presence of violent crowds outside the square.

I had agreed to give an interview to Amy Goodman's Democracy Now [\[1\]](#), so I left to go to a recording studio about fifteen minutes away from the square. I arrived at an office full of foreign reporters. They were all coming in with reports of attacks, insults and destruction of their equipment. At 3:00 in the afternoon, I recorded my interview with Democracy Now's senior producer Sharif Abdel Kouddous, and when I was done I headed back to the square with Sharif and a cameraperson. We were in good spirits and felt brave despite the reports of danger. On the street near the studio, we got separated. Alone, I decided to make my way back to the square. Near the Egyptian museum, I was confronted with real thugs, some of whom were hurling rocks into the square. I walked through several rows of them before one caught on and asked me where I was going. I made up a story about a nephew who was hurt inside, said that I was going to take him home. "No, you stay here," he said. "We can get him." A second later, someone else asked: "So you are not with them? Are you with us?" My mind was racing. Could I fool him by giving a fraudulent answer? I was smack in the midst of utter chaos and erupting violence. I froze for a few seconds, and then when I thought I had an opportune moment, I dashed past a few more rows. I was less than four feet away from the army barricades around the square. If I had crossed them, I would have been in, safe from the thugs, even if not from their volleying rocks. But I was not so lucky. From behind me I heard someone cry, "She is with them. Get her. Get her!" Before I realized what was happening, my arms were seized by two musclemen who walked me away from the square. All I could hear as the mob closed in on me was: "She is with them... with them... the agents...the Americans... Baradei's dirty supporter." Many thugs pulled my hair while others volunteered slaps and slurs. In a matter of seconds my shirt was ripped open and my mouth was full of blood. We passed an army tank and I saw the officer on top. "Help!" I screamed. The soldiers were waiting for his orders. Bystanders called on him. "They are going to kill her," someone said. All my energies were focused on staying conscious, putting my head up for air and down to avoid further hits. I wrapped my jacket around my body and my shoulder bag, which had my ID and my camera, and cried for the officer's help again. Finally he ordered the soldiers to jump into the crowd and pull me up. They led me into the inside of the tank where I joined a few other soldiers. They pointed out that my head was bleeding. I had not yet registered my head injury, which must have been caused by a rock projectile. I also had not registered that my phone was stolen out of my back pocket and that a gold chain had been yanked off my neck. One of the soldiers offered me a big kerchief to staunch the bleeding and another held out his water bottle. I could hear the crowds raging outside. Two other young men, one of them a journalist, were brought into the tank a little later. Both were badly injured. It was not until darkness fell, about two hours later, that the officer felt that it was safe enough for him to call an ambulance to take us to a nearby hospital. My injuries were less serious than those suffered by the two other protestors and as I learned later, there were others who suffered much more serious and even fatal injuries. Men and women were brutalized. A young woman, Sally Zahran, died of brain hemorrhage after an attack not far from Tahrir. Mubarak's thugs unleashed their ugliest face and to top it off, they resorted to their familiar technique of sexually abusing female protesters.

Unbeknownst to them at the time, the Mubarakoids' ugliness may have helped to unite the protesters so that they could win one of their final battles against the regime. February 2, 2011, recalled images of another "Black Wednesday," May 25, 2005. On that day, now six years ago, the Egyptian public protested the notorious amendment to article 76 of the constitution. Then, as now, the police responded with repression. Then, as now, women were singularly targeted for sexual assault. Human rights organizations filed numerous reports of women being sexually assaulted. Journalists, lawyers, and other well known activist leaders had their clothes ripped and were striped

down to their under garments

Black Wednesday of 2005 was followed by similarly dark Thursdays and Mondays. The performance in which thugs in plainclothes always joined the uniformed police was repeated every time there were protests against fraudulent elections and referenda. Police custody, which under emergency law could be extended indefinitely and follow arrests without formal legal charges, became the government's optimal means of sexually assaulting activists. The regime's thugs counted on those measures to intimidate female activists and to ensure that those assaulted would never show their face in public again. Yet the women protesters did show up, again and again. I saw many of them in Tahrir on the days that followed February 2nd. Seeing them there in force and vigor, I knew we would win, and that it was a matter of time before members of the regime would be the ones to hide their faces in shame. I also knew that it was not in the last two weeks but in the long years of struggle by Egyptian women and men dedicated to ending Mubarak's dictatorship and bringing democracy home that they had found the means to take back the streets.

Democracy remains an aspirational project. But the thugs are in hiding, shamed and scared, and the streets are ours.

Noha Radwan, Feb 20 2011

P.S.

* <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/694/how-egyptian-women-took-back-the-street-between-tw>

Footnotes

[1] http://www.democracynow.org/2011/2/2/as_mubarak_pledges_to_finish_term