

The revolution continues

Author: Paul Sedra

There is a particular image from 25 January 2011 that has left an indelible mark on my consciousness — one that has fundamentally shaped the way in which I understand post-revolutionary Egypt. So important is the image to my mind that I regularly show the video from which it is drawn to the Canadian students in my various Middle Eastern history courses, in an effort to capture for them what the Egyptian revolution is all about.

The image is one of protesters confronting riot police in Tahrir Square. Amid the droning sirens of the various police vehicles in the square, a murmur gradually rises from within the multitude of protesters to the level of a deafening cry: “Ya khawana!” (“Traitors!”) Stones hurtle past the video camera as the Central Security Forces, outfitted in full riot gear with helmets and masks, scurry away from the throng of Egyptians, who are determined to stand their ground against this loathed emblem of the former regime.

The fact that the police are running for cover toward the Mugamaa government building in Tahrir, an equally loathed emblem of the authoritarian state, only adds to the power of the image.

One of the most persistently repeated narratives of the revolution suggests that what was important about 25 January was that it was the day the so-called “barrier of fear” finally fell away, apparently permitting Egyptians finally to summon up the courage to confront the repressive Hosni Mubarak regime. Among the various narratives of the revolution, this strikes me as deeply flawed for a whole host of reasons — not least because I have never regarded Egyptians as a particularly “fearful” bunch.

One need only look to Egyptian history and the countless instances of revolt against comparable adversaries — the British in 1919 and 1936, Gamal Abdel Nasser in February 1968, Anwar Sadat in January 1977 — to grasp that Egyptians are not much for cowering in the face of oppression.

To my mind, what was important about 25 January was that it furnished an opportunity for disparate political forces to join together in protest against a particularly hated emblem of the old regime — namely, the police. From that foundation, a mass movement could build as never before, particularly given the arrogance and intransigence of the Mubarak autocracy.

Of course, one of the questions much in the minds and on the lips of Egyptians as we approach the second anniversary of the revolution is whether a second revolution is in the offing. Will 25 January 2013 furnish an opportunity much like that which 25 January 2011 offered, to unite disparate political forces in protest against the Brotherhood regime led by President Mohamed Morsy?

There is certainly no dearth of discontent in the land to motivate a second revolution. The Brotherhood regime has used every lever of power at its disposal to secure its own dominance in the political sphere, rather than to secure Egypt’s purported democratic transition.

The martyrs of the revolution remain almost entirely without the justice repeatedly promised to

them by politicians. And perhaps most galling for all those who participated in the revolution is the fact that the corruption and brutality of the police remain largely intact.

But if there is an issue that will motivate a second revolution, it is surely the utterly unfulfilled call for social justice that still resonates throughout Egypt.

While the president gives speeches to the Shura Council about how the country's economic fortunes are improving, talk of a "revolution of the hungry" continues to spread. And frankly, those who purport to lead the opposition seem oddly deaf to this talk, focused on questions of law and procedure, almost to the exclusion of the vital question of sheer survival that countless Egyptians face.

As ever, I look to Egyptians themselves, rather than their leaders, to show the way. Perhaps 25 January 2013 will prove to be the day that Egyptians declare they have had enough of the neo-liberal economic policies that have left them without the staples of their existence. Perhaps that day remains two weeks, two months or, indeed, two years away.

But that the day is coming, I have no doubt. And on that day, the president will learn that the revolution needs no laws to protect it.

The revolution continues.

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