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Sheila Carapico
*University of Richmond*, scarapic@richmond.edu

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# 10

# Egypt's Civic Revolution Turns 'Democracy Promotion' on Its Head

*Sheila Carapico*

Did western political aid agencies encourage the 25 January uprising with their civil society promotion projects? Did they encourage mass mobilization against the regime, or perhaps tutor dissidents in how to organize grassroots opposition? At the same time as the United States and other NATO powers were providing economic and military assistance to the Egyptian regime, did they also foment popular defiance? Some people seem to think so; different narratives about foreign provocation of Egypt's uprising circulated in Arabic and in English.

First, as Egyptians filled the public squares with cries for the demise of the Mubarak administration, his government's officials flailed about, seeking to blame the disturbances on outside troublemakers and foreign infiltrators. Disorder was blamed variously on foreign journalists, global rights-monitoring organizations, U.S.-based democracy brokers, and, most disparagingly, the latter's Egyptian partners and grantees.

From another angle, soon after Mubarak's resignation, American journalists hunted for shreds of evidence that U.S.-funded civil society promotion projects had "nurtured young democrats" prior to the uprising by offering training on organization, social networking, and new social media; by some U.S. news accounts, American government-funded non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like the National Endowment for Democracy, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican

Institute (IRI), and Freedom House played a role in fomenting Egypt's revolt.[1] A related story line credited a private citizen, Gene Sharp, the Boston-based author of an impressive and widely translated compilation of 198 tactics for nonviolent resistance, with devising the 'playbook' that toppled the Egyptian government.[2] The connection to a successful, populist, western-backed anti-authoritarian drive in Serbia, where Sharp's techniques had evidently been put to effective use, seemed especially intriguing.[3]

Even more ominously, during the long, hot summer of 2011, the transitional military government seized on international news reports that some leading protesters had attended training sessions sponsored by the European Union, U.S.-based quasi-NGOs, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Sharp's International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, or Serbian youth associated with the Center for Applied Non-Violent Action and Strategies (CANVAS) as grounds for investigating their 'seditious' activities and accounts. Sketchy secondhand evidence of 'working with foreign agendas' and 'secret bank accounts' was propagandized to slander some Egyptian protest organizers and human rights defenders. Egyptian organizations that received American and/or European training or funding, whether before or since the revolution, were brought to a military court.

The notion that western efforts to promote civil society had offered resources for insurrectionary mobilization seemed logical to some western liberal internationalists, even though they were taken aback by the 'Arab Spring,' because it was consistent with their hope that the United States and Europe support popular aspirations for liberty and justice abroad. At the same time, the suggestion was plausible to some Egyptians who, according to conventional wisdom, had been taught never to rebel against their rulers. Yet many scholars familiar with foreign donor activities would doubt that the United States or the European Union had actually helped to incite unruly, contentious, bottom-up mobilization. To the contrary, observers in Latin America, Africa, Palestine, and elsewhere had associated civil society promotion with the anti-revolutionary interests of great powers.

Some critical scholars argued that donors' NGO funding practices sidelined welfare and services, instead enlisting professional non-profit think tanks to rationalize neoliberal economic agendas that often disadvantage the poor. According to this analysis, civil society promotion was designed to cloister intellectual counter-elites into non-confrontational, white-collar activities outside the body politic (Guilhot 2005; Kamat 2003; Petras 1999; Robinson 1996; Encarnación 2000, 2003). Concurrently, the

separation of welfare and labor issues from advocacy for procedural democratization seemed to delegitimize pleas for social programs and economic justice. The 'professionalization' of cosmopolitan Arab NGOs working in spaces where English is the lingua franca, humanitarian norms are shared, and metropolitan office practices prevail was a form of "depoliticization" of Palestinian activism, according to Rema Hammami (1995). Islah Jad, another Palestinian activist intellectual critical of donor practices, called this the "NGO-ization" of politics (2004). Another analyst pointed to the consequent political and economic competition among Palestinian civil society groups (Jamal 2007). Echoing these concerns about the effects of foreign funding on civic activism, Maha Abdelrahman worried about the effects of foreign funding on Egyptian civil society: "The idealized space where the weak are supposed to be fighting their battles for freedom and justice has been hijacked by segments of the (petite) bourgeoisie who have found their niche in the growing sector of NGOs." By these and similar reckonings, civil society promotion was designed to forestall disruptive mass uprisings, not to encourage them.

Other scholars and activists have argued persuasively that American military aid and European cultivation of formal partnerships with Arab autocrats belied their rhetorical commitments to democratization, favoring authoritarian stability over the vicissitudes of the popular will (Hamid 2011; Khalidi 2004). The Egyptian government received $1.3 billion annually in American assistance alone, much of that budgeted for the armed forces. America and also Europe seemed to be betting on the status quo. Western powers clung to the Mubaraks even after the writing was so starkly written on the wall, and then seemed to back the military government that took over after 11 February. Many participants and commentators noticed that tear-gas canisters lobbed at protesters from January through November 2011 were 'made in the USA.'

The analysis presented here takes these points into account, but offers another perspective centered on two radically different conceptions of civil society. The first is the donor-driven reification of civil society as 'CSOs' (civil society organizations) and 'NGOs' with office suites, websites, letterhead, boards of directors, mission statements, and official licensure by the United Nations, the World Bank, the European Union, or American agencies, as well as the relevant Egyptian government ministries. International democracy brokers and professional transitologists frame civil society as an assembly of organizations. This frame is almost

a grid. Civil society seems to consist entirely of institutions, not people. Actions are planned in advance by leaders, and audited by international agencies. They are emphatically not improvised from the bottom up. Even before the upheavals, this managerial model was almost inevitably detached from popular aspirations in Palestine and in Egypt (Challand 2010; Tadros 2010; Abdo 2010). This way of framing civil society as comprised of formal, professional advocacy organizations pays no attention to the contentious politics analyzed in other chapters in this book.

An alternative, people-centered conceptualization of civil society includes workshops for professionals, but also incorporates other, more fluid, horizontal forms of activism in the public civic sphere, including civil disobedience and grassroots mobilization. Using such a model we can see how popular appropriation of the national commons challenged not only longstanding Egyptian laws and regulations inhibiting rights of association, assembly, and expression, but also the ways in which outsiders thought about civic participation and, indeed, donor-driven ideas of orderly transition to democracy.

The 25 January revolt invites us to consider a more contentious, concentric, dynamic view of civil society. In this chapter, therefore, I explain why it is ludicrous to assert that 'civil society promotion' projects prompted revolutionary upheavals. Instead, the civic revolution in Egypt ought to prompt western democracy experts to reconsider their operational definitions of 'civil society' and to move beyond the paradigm of managed, incremental 'transitions.' The public civic sphere needs to be understood as a site of contentious politics and transformative potential rather than a sphere of management. My overall thesis is that the revolution in Egyptian public civic life fits with this dynamic notion of mobilized civic activism, not the managerial model of civil society.

In particular, this chapter contrasts the kinds of programs, organizations, and procedures supported by international democracy brokers in the name of 'civil society promotion' with the actual praxis of civic self-organization during a tumultuous period. The first part of this chapter describes American and European projects that encouraged the 'professionalization' of formal NGOs and CSOs—encouraging them to produce audited accounts, three-year strategic plans, technocratic credentials, bureaucratic procedures, and counter-terror pledges—and explores their repertoires, rhetoric, and institutional practices. While some political aid indubitably supported worthy partners harassed by the Egyptian regime,

the bureaucratic, managerial procedures for funding CSOs and NGOs were not meant to encourage sweeping or sudden political change. If anything, like Latin Americans and Africans, some Egyptians might argue that they were designed to forestall rather than foment revolutionary turmoil. While Sharp's more progressive populist ideas for mobilization were somewhat more relevant to Egypt's revolution, they seem to have reached Egyptians indirectly via contacts with youth leaders of the Serbian crusade that ousted a tyrant. The evidence is that their model was only one among many diverse influences on Egypt's *shabab* (youth).

In the second section I show how the boisterous, adaptive strategies of agitation—even if they began among tech-savvy dissidents—relied on vernacular energies to devise ways of breaching security barricades, organizing marches, self-managing camp-outs and sit-ins, protecting protesters and neighborhoods, directing traffic, disposing of trash, caring for the injured, deploying music and art, reaching the international media, defending themselves against police brutality, and so forth. I rely mainly on my own notes, observations, and conversations to tell the Tahrir story as I saw it. The narrow objective is simply to show that these activities went far beyond the projects and organizational formats recommended by international trainers: civil society and pro-democracy activism burst out of the boxed-in model of planning and management created and exemplified by formal, professionalized institutions to encompass mass acts of defiance. In a particular place and time, 'Midan al-Tahrir,' literally 'Liberation Square,' signified the liberation of the public civic sphere. This approach reaffirms a nuanced definition of 'civil society' and presents the Egyptian experience as a civic revolution. In other words, although there has not yet been a full-scale political regime change, nor a social revolution redistributing wealth among socioeconomic classes, Egyptians have reconfigured the public civic sphere and widened the scope of civic activism. If international democracy brokers want to prove themselves relevant to the anticipated political transition, they ought to think outside the box.

## Understanding Civil Society

Civil society is a classic social science construct, broadly defined as an associational space situated between governments and households, and also between the public state sector and the commercial economy. Thus when we think of civil society we think of professional associations, charities,

universities, interest groups, media outlets, and community betterment groups; of public gatherings or displays in civic-minded parades, concerts, or museums; and of suffrage, labor, civil rights, anti-war, and environmental movements. Often called the non-profit, non-governmental, or 'third' sector, civil society is driven by neither the profit motive of businesses nor the political ambitions of political parties or revolutionary movements. It is a place for voluntarism, philanthropy, and public-spirited activism, a sphere of civil discourse, a metaphorical public square (Seligman 1992). Some imagine it as a distinctively modern phenomenon that has gradually replaced primordial associations grounded in ascriptive bonds of caste and clan with individualist membership in the organizations of mass, bourgeois society. In many conceptualizations, a vibrant civic associational network and a lively public intellectual sphere of civility are the sine qua non for democratic development; in other words, the test of civil society is its ability to enable democratic transitions. By this criterion, Egyptian civil society seemed, in 2010, rather moribund.

We also know, however, that when the circumstances demand it, civil society can enable communities to cope with physical or political adversity, to navigate bureaucratic obstacles, and even to challenge authoritarianism. Indeed, comparative and historical research in Europe, the Americas, and elsewhere shows that civil society is not a constant, unchanging cultural attribute, but rather a variable that changes shape and size according to political and economic conditions (Carapico 1998). At different moments German civil society, for instance, marched for Nazism, cowered from a police state, and breached the Berlin Wall. In the United States, civil society operated differently in colonial days, the Jim Crow era, the Great Depression, the Second World War, the Vietnam protests, and the age of electronic networks, and it still assumes different forms in contemporary rural Wyoming, Manhattan, and New Orleans. Civic networks in the old Soviet Union and postcolonial Africa have at times been fully penetrated by central governments, but then found outlets in religious or cultural expression or enclaves inside totalitarian state systems. Likewise, in Egypt and the greater Arab region, by 2010 we had already recognized that even though governments worked very hard and vigilantly to contain, co-opt, or suppress independent energies, people still found outlets for civic impulses in everyday ways of working for common purposes either within the system or in enclaves outside it; moreover, when legal avenues for complaint and lobbying

were exhausted and conditions become intolerable, Egyptians and their neighbors did take to the streets in exceptional civic moments of mass engagement (Carapico 2010; El-Mahdi 2009a, 2009b).

## Civil Society Promotion

Regarding foreign support for civil society, in Mubarak's Egypt there was a complex dynamic among a regime determined to co-opt both civic activism and foreign aid, international democracy brokers caught between their reformist mission and American realpolitik, and the bilingual strata of activists enmeshed in both national and transnational regimes of governmentality (Carapico, forthcoming). Time and again, the Mubarak administration regulated and re-regulated which civil society groups could operate legally, fought to monopolize distribution of all forms of foreign aid, and prosecuted intellectuals for 'taking foreign money' or violating the strict regulations on non-profit associations (Abdelrahman 2004b; Pratt 2006). The United States and the other major NATO powers tended to favor the stability of the regime over activities that would rock the boat. Labor activism was certainly not part of their agenda.

Political aid donors borrowed the logic of civil society funding from the economic stimulus paradigm that underlies much conventional development assistance: financial and institutional resources would stimulate 'demand' from extra-governmental lobbies, public action committees, watchdog groups, businesswomen's associations, investigative journalists, and advocates for the poor. This template called for grants, training, and conference interactions to motivate think tanks to generate empirical evidence and ideological arguments for liberal democracy. Accordingly, projects encouraged publications and training by professional research centers, media institutes, offices of gender analysis, human rights monitors, opinion survey companies, educational foundations, law academies, legal counseling centers, and other such bodies. Particularly in the Middle East, think tanks were considered "useful organizational vehicles" for influencing public opinion "through the sponsorship of specific research agendas and policy dialogues" (Schlumberger 2000, 253, 255). Yet in Egypt, Palestine, and elsewhere, research showed that the main impact of civil society programs was neither on the 'macro' level of national reform nor the 'micro' level of grassroots sentiments, but rather on the 'meso' level of elite advocacy (Brouwer 2000; Carapico 2002). Further research in Palestine suggested a political

paradox of 'heteronomy' whereby the success of NGOs in the donor circuit was inversely related to grassroots concerns, and disproportionate resources were funneled through pyramidal 'multiplicator' NGOs relaying messages from donors and filtering bottom-up communications (Challand 2010).

Let us look into this more closely. Although the discourses of civil society among international democracy brokers reflect a fluid understanding of the concept, institutional practices promote very particular organizational rubric. The Foundation for the Future, for instance, a U.S.-led multilateral civil society funding mechanism for the Middle East, explained in its 2010 annual report that:

> The civil society is the arena of voluntary collective actions, whose institutional forms differ from the state, the family and the market. Civil society organizations (CSOs) include nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs), faith-based organizations, charitable organizations, foundations, labor unions and professional associations, advocacy groups, research institutions, as well as more informal political, social and religious movements.[4]

Although on the one hand this definition includes informal 'off the grid' movements, on the other the term 'civil society' becomes equated throughout the donor literature (and much academic writing as well) with organizations. All three acronyms used in the definition above imply a degree of formality and permanence inconsistent with many voluntary collective actions. The common substitution of the neologisms 'CSO' or 'NGO' for the written terms 'civil society' or 'activism in the civic arena' encourages a highly institutional conceptualization of civil society.

Moreover, while acronyms made from initial letters are commonly used in English or French, they do not work in Arabic. They tend therefore to be creolized, with the effect that the Latin-alphabet expressions 'NGO' and 'CSO' become disembodied abstractions with no literal meaning at all. Using these terms interchangeably with 'civil society' reduces the latter to particular kinds of organizations and excludes acts of resistance from the picture.

In Egypt, all associations and civil companies were required to undergo cumbersome, intrusive procedures for registering with the Ministry of Social Solidarity and/or the Ministry of Interior. In addition, the Egyptian government had long insisted that only organizations that were 'legally

licensed' should qualify for external funding, and that all foreign aid must be distributed through central government ministries. There had been many disputes between the Mubarak regime and American, European, and other foreign donor agencies over this issue (Abdelrahman 2004b; Pratt 2006). A long campaign financed by the World Bank and the European Union and joined by groups like the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, the Fredrich Naumann Stiftung, and the Club de Madrid, among others, failed to convince the Mubarak administration to liberalize its byzantine laws governing civic associations (Carapico, forthcoming). In the end, the Obama administration agreed to Cairo's demand to maintain government control of all official aid earmarked for extra-governmental associations. Taken together, Egyptian and international policies seriously restricted access to foreign assets by oppositional groups or quasi-underground movements.

Furthermore, under their own operating procedures, donor agencies developed very precise bureaucratic criteria for CSOs to be eligible for small grants and/or inclusion in NGO conferences and networks. Indeed the term 'NGO' was originally coined by the United Nations to distinguish member-state institutions from other entities working with the international body. To register as an observer at a UN convention or to obtain funds from European or American agencies, NGOs needed to submit paperwork to document goals expressly consonant with the those of the sponsors, three years' worth of financial records, certification of elections for their board of directors, and a suitable program or plan of activities. Those that made the grade—formal organizations with professional translators and accountants, a 'track record,' and organizational mandates consistent with donor objectives —could compete for dollars and euros.

Not surprisingly, by the twenty-first century the procedures for registration with international agencies had become routinized and also politicized. After the turn of the millennium, America's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) outlined its grant application process in a forty-page instruction manual. It explained why and how NGOs should engage in "strategic planning" based on a clear "mission statement" and well-kept "financial accounts"; called for proposals for "reform programs" addressing MEPI's four pillars of democracy, economic growth, education, and women's empowerment; and specified admissibility criteria of accounting, bylaws, and anti-terrorism pledges.[5] Like other U.S. government-funded agencies MEPI issued a 'transparency directive' requiring grant recipients to make the relationship visible by displaying the donor's

logo on bumper stickers, posters, websites, pamphlets, or other materials.[6] To applicants, these rules ever more closely approximated Egyptian requirements for associations and companies to be certified. To Foucauldian scholars, they looked like rubrics of regimentation and surveillance. In retrospect, we can see how far they were from revolutionary praxis.

Such conditions were widely if variably replicated. The thematic categories of the Anna Lindh Foundation's (ALF) Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures were somewhat different from MEPI's; one year its objectives of improving mutual perceptions, youth and artist exchanges, and coexistence between European and Mediterranean partners seemed more creative and perhaps more progressive.[7] But the call for proposals consonant with "strategic fields" and the lengthy application form with its rubrics of "target groups" and "long-term multiplier effects" as well as financial, managerial, and technical "proficiency requirements" (ALF 2009) paralleled the parameters of MEPI, the Foundation for the Future, and other transnational CSO grant-making agencies. NGO organizers needed to mimic certain kinds of knowledge and bureaucratic institutional structures and practices. Formal organization was the sine qua non to qualify for funding; no mass movements of students, workers, peasants, or faith congregations need apply.

Similarly, the NGOConnect guidebook—USAID's civil society promotion program—defined NGO "networks" as "civil society groups, organizations and sometimes, individuals that come together voluntarily to pursue shared purposes of social development or democratic governance."[8] Although this notion might seem to apply to revolutionary mobilization, the manual also underscores planning and organization. "Successful networks are not created overnight," it cautions, advising that "[n]ew networks should consider the level of social capital existing among members and the extent to which the environment can be considered 'enabling' for the network's aims and prospective activities" (11). Finally, "Even the most collaborative network will fail if it does not have a sound technical program strategy and the expertise to achieve its desired social impacts."[9] Especially when coupled with rigid procedural rules, this advice proved utterly irrelevant to the progressive commotion stirred up by the very absence of an 'enabling environment' and carried out without a 'sound technical program.'

It is not my contention that *no* American or European organizations funded activities relevant to Egyptians' mass protests in 2011, much less

that there was no contact between some protest leaders and foreign agencies. Perhaps training in how to upload video captured on cell phones to the Internet and use Google Earth as a mapping device were of some use to Egyptian activists, for instance.[10] Clearly, grantees or partners of USAID, the European Community, MEPI, the Anna Lindh Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures, the Soros Foundation's Open Society Institute, and so forth, acting either as individuals or as institutions, took part in the vigils in Tahrir Square, helped organize the logistics, defended those arrested, and documented human rights abuses. Of course there were contacts, and some funding arrangements. But the projects of international democracy brokers were hardly revolutionary.

## The Nonviolent Playbook

Some of the tactics of nonviolent resistance against dictatorships that Sharp first collected and put into a handbook for Burmese dissidents in Thailand in 1993—later widely publicized, translated, and updated—did feature in the repertoires of Egyptian protesters (Sharp 2010, 79–86). I identified from his numbered list of 198 tactics at least fourteen activities that I observed in Cairo in January and February 2011:

7. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols;
8. Banners, posters, and displayed communications;
20. Prayer and worship;
35. Humorous skits and pranks;
36. Performances of plays and music;
37. Singing;
38. Marches;
43. Political mourning;
47. Assemblies of protest or support;
122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance;
158. Self-exposure to the elements;
167. Pray-in;
180. Alternative communication system; and
184. Defiance of blockades (or, notably, in the Egyptian case, though not explicitly in Sharp's pacifist list, of police barricades).

These practices and the spirit of Sharp's recommendations on how to exploit the weaknesses of authoritarian dictatorships were certainly more relevant to the revolution than the tame and managed institutional

practices and white-collar round tables of the democracy-promotion industry. But Sharp did not invent these strategies or patent them; they are activities Egyptians, Yemenis, Tunisians, Palestinians, and many other people imagined and enacted on their own.

A version of Sharp's message of nonviolent resistance reached Egyptians via associates of the Serbian youth movement associated with CANVAS, in Belgrade, some of whose leaders had been active in the briefly successful but now defunct *Otpor!* movement for change. Evidently with at least some support from American agencies like NDI and IRI, representatives of the Egyptian 'Youth for Change' movement attended a CANVAS meeting in New York and a week-long course for international activists in Belgrade.[11] These workshops featured interesting ideas about breaking obedience patterns, tips on assembling flash demonstrations to confuse security police, and stories from the revolt sometimes called the 'bulldozer revolution' in remembrance of the day a lone, brave heavy-equipment driver blocked the way of Serbian army tanks.

However, CANVAS's "basic curriculum" does not seem like a blueprint for the Egyptian intifada. Apparently reflecting the logic of its own funders, the description of the lesson plans read in part:

> There is rarely victory for nonviolent movements without a strategic plan. Therefore, an understanding of basic strategic principles (Lesson 7) as well as tools and techniques to analyze their past and current situation (Lesson 8 and Lesson A1) is important as movements develop their strategic plans. An essential part of those plans will be communications. How do movements effectively communicate what they stand for? Developing effective messages and analyzing audience segments (Lesson 9) and understanding the tools and types of targeted communications (Lesson 10) are essential. Targeted communication is one of the most important parts of any movement's strategic plan.[12]

This is a manual for a long-term, well-organized campaign. Its motto is "unity, discipline, and planning." It assumes centralized leadership and a relatively hierarchical organizational structure. As I will demonstrate shortly, this does not correspond to what happened in Tahrir Square and other public spaces across Egypt.

Furthermore, there were significant differences between the Serbian and Egyptian democratic movements (Hamid 2011). Serbs had stronger labor unions and political parties. Serbian 'youth' were energetically encouraged and subsidized by American and European governments to overthrow a regime hostile to the European Union and the United States. NATO had already bombed Serbia to halt its aggression in Kosovo, and western leaders had belligerently denounced the fraudulent election of the dictator Slobodan Milošević. Not so in Egypt, whose government and military were beneficiaries of so much western largesse and support.

At most, according to activists, CANVAS and Sharp's manuals were two among many diverse inspirations for the 25 January uprising, and in any case not thanks to any direct foreign funding. In a forum on the Egyptian Revolution at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Center for International Studies Starr Center on April 29, 2011, Tahrir activists Ahmed Maher and Waleed Rashed mentioned that an April 6 Movement colleague attended an *Otpor!* training and talked about having studied the Serbian tactics of peaceful protest. They spoke as much or more about American civil rights leaders Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr., contacts with Palestinian, Tunisian, Sudanese, and Cuban dissidents, Mahatma Gandhi's passive anti-colonial struggle, the anti-authoritarian movement in Chile, movies and documentaries about social protests and police crackdowns, the importance of mass and social media, and, especially, the hard lessons learned during several years of organizing protests against the Mubarak regime. Specifically questioned about help from American funding agencies and Gene Sharp, they replied that they avoided contradicting U.S. foreign policy by encouraging the Egyptian opposition to engage in civil disobedience; on the question of non-violence, they emphasized the difference between armed resistance in Libya and unarmed resistance in Egypt. Digital activist and blogger Hossam El-Hamalawy told the conference "From Tahrir: Revolution or Democratic Transition?" at the American University in Cairo (AUC) on June 4, 2011 that he had never heard of Gene Sharp until western journalists began crediting him with inspiring the revolution, pointing out that the 25 January movement was not purely *silmiya*, 'peaceful': citizens fought back against police and set fire to police stations and ruling party offices. Other speakers and participants at the conference cited the protests in neighboring Tunisia sparked by a desperate suicide. They also referred to earlier models familiar to Egyptian intellectuals, including the worldwide

protests in 1968, Marx's writings on the Paris Commune of 1848, two decades of anti-apartheid struggles in South Africa, the works of Franz Fanon and the famous Gilo Pontecorvo film *Battle of Algiers*, revolutionary heroes as different as Gandhi and Che Guevara, and Iranian demonstrations in 2009. Most centrally, in their presentations Saber Barakat, May AbdelRazik, and Dina Shehata joined El-Hamalawy in reviewing the ways in which Egyptian labor, popular defense, and youth movements had learned from their own successes and setbacks how to mount effective protest and civil disobedience campaigns.

## The Civic Revolution, in Stages

While professional transitologists insisted on the necessity of planning and organization, in Egypt in 2011 necessity was the mother of invention. A demonstration planned for 25 January—a nationwide movement demanding the downfall of the regime—gained its own dynamic forward thrust. Of course, before, during, and after the mass outpouring launched on 25 January, different groups and individuals had been poring over a range of historical, social, and even entertainment sources and also analyzed the tactics and weapons wielded by police and security forces against demonstrators in Egypt in recent years. All of this was vital. Nonetheless, after 25 January, the horizon for naming and handling the logistics of the next demonstration was defined by evolving exigencies and opportunities. At least initially, the 'strategic objective' was simply to register mass discontent.

### The medium or the mother's message

Several astute commentators have questioned the image of an online virtual revolution (Herrara 2011; El-Ghobashy 2011).[13] Certainly, purposeful bloggers and members of Facebook, including the "We Are All Khaled Said" page, relied on computers to reach online audiences in Egypt and abroad. Nonetheless, the metaphor of a digital revolt tends to confuse the medium with the message. I personally became aware that something dramatic would happen on 25 January from a YouTube video distributed via Facebook. In the clip, the mother of Khaled Said, a handsome woman perhaps fifty years of age dressed simply in a grey hijab, spoke clearly, earnestly, eloquently to the camera from a sofa in her Alexandria living room. She implored patriots to mark Police Day by showing popular solidarity against police brutality. She appealed to the

galvanizing moral outrage at the senseless murder of her son, who could be anybody's son. While the Internet brought Umm Khalid's message to me and to countless Egyptians, her plea was more warmly human than the cold, electronic medium of its delivery.

### Mass rallies: 25, 26, 27 January

Others besides Umm Khalid, her family, and the April 6 and Youth for Change coalitions spread the word to demonstrate on Police Day—an official holiday—via cell phones and face-to-face conversations. Taxi drivers passed the news. The stratagem for Police Day was to maximize turnout by assembling in scores of accessible public squares around central Cairo and then marching along major thoroughfares toward the heart of the city, gathering numbers along the way. This kind of acephalous, decentralized preparation to mobilize crowds for a day relied more on neighborhood-level interpersonal networks than hierarchical organization. Moreover, as many have observed, members of labor unions, political parties, and other established institutions participated in great numbers, but in their capacity as citizens, not as members of official groups. Once things got underway, small collectivities in different locations needed to think on their feet.

The momentum of 25 January exceeded organizers' dreams. After tens of thousands marched toward Tahrir Square that Tuesday, defying the Interior Ministry's riot police, thousands returned on Wednesday and Thursday; hundreds never left Tahrir. Between the famed Mugamma' building and the even more renowned Egyptian Museum, and in central plazas in Suez, Alexandria, and other cities, they coalesced into a multitude, a *sha'ab* ('people') with a newfound sense of collective solidarity and togetherness. The spectacle of hope was a major global news story.

With a couple of days' notice, people used Facebook, Twitter, and old-fashioned interpersonal or landline communication to spread calls for mass rallies on Friday 28 January, named a "day of rage." The message, complete with tips for self-defense against the weapons fired on the 25th, went viral. It was picked up by Al Jazeera and western news outlets. The wide posting also tipped off the regime, which blocked Facebook, then pulled the plug on the Internet, and finally suspended cell-phone service. By dawn on Friday, tens of thousands of riot police were positioned around major intersections, key government buildings, bridges, and Tahrir Square. The challenge for the demonstrators was to break through these

concentric barriers of intimidation and constraint. In the heat of a veritable battle, new tactics specific to the social geography of Cairo and Egypt were devised on the spot.

### Storming the barricades: Friday 28 January

I witnessed the security police force firsthand. While Egyptian colleagues planned to congregate at Opera Square to march across the bridge to Tahrir, I formulated my own half-baked plan to go directly to the AUC campus in Tahrir Square. I packed some very healthy peanut butter breakfast cereal (Panda Puffs), water, eye drops, and scarves, and at about 10:30 a.m. hailed a taxi in Maadi and asked the driver to take me to the metro station. He asked where I was headed and I said Tahrir Square. He said the metro would not be stopping there "due to Friday prayers," and the usual route along the Corniche was impassable, but he could take me via the Autostrad and the Qasr al-'Aini Bridge.

Along all but deserted roads, we drove by paddy wagons and police lined up in riot gear on overpasses and at major crossings. The lines of men armed with gas masks, shields, helmets, jackboots, and batons thickened as we approached Tahrir. The worried taxi driver very reluctantly let me off near AUC's Falaki campus. I bought a kilo of bananas and another bottle of water and walked, an invisible, naive expat out buying groceries, back to Tahrir, past uniformed formations, armored vehicles, and obvious security thugs in expensive suits talking on their own cell phones or walkie-talkies. This was a formidable defense of the central public space in Egypt from the Egyptian citizenry. I personally was stranded, safely, inside the police cordon. The guards at AUC's Tahrir campus would not open the gates for me, but I found refuge in the Falaki facility a couple of blocks off the square. From the Falaki roof, I could see police, shoulder to shoulder, outside the gates, and every fifty meters on surrounding streets. But a guard told me I had been spotted from the roof of AUC's Oriental Hall building (on Tahrir Square itself) and sternly advised me to stay inside.

Tumultuously, the tide turned at the end of that tense day. Two things occurred nearby, but beyond my direct line of vision—although I could hear, smell, and feel parts of both—and far from either Sharp's nonviolent playbook or expert recipes for civil society engagement. My colleagues and thousands of others who assembled at Opera Square attempted to cross the formidable barricades on the bridge leading to Tahrir Square. As Rabab El-Mahdi said at AUC's "From Tahrir" conference on 4 June, by

5:00 p.m. they had almost lost hope of entering the square until sports fans accustomed to scuffles with the police took the lead with aggressive tactics like setting cars on fire and erecting barricades. At last, despite being pummeled with tear gas and live ammunition, the demonstrators stormed through the rows of riot squads on the Qasr al-Nil Bridge. Subaltern forces had breached police lines there, in front of the Arab League building, and perhaps at other spots. Within a few minutes, the ruling National Democratic Party headquarters situated between the Nile and Tahrir Square was set ablaze. As dusk settled in, blocks away and several stories up, I saw flames, sneezed from tear gas, and heard a human roar. As police who had been given orders to stand down fled their positions pell-mell, citizens occupied the central plaza.

What happened next was not planned. AUC's dedicated guards, who all afternoon had kept me inside the safety of the Falaki campus, announced that since a "state of emergency" and a 6:00 p.m. curfew had been declared I needed to "go home." Out on the streets it was pandemonium. The riot police had broken ranks, thrown down their helmets and shields, taken off the sweaters bearing their insignia, and were running in the opposite direction from civilians swarming toward Tahrir. Burning tires spewed flames and smoke. There were hardly any cars on the usually crammed streets of central Cairo. Failing to "find me a taxi," an AUC guard instead prevailed upon a kind Egyptian family, with their infant and three young children, who had been visiting family downtown, to give me a ride. Yasir, the father, behind the wheel, drove far out of their way (their home was in Giza, where he owns a small fish shop) along a backstreet route full of twists and turns because so many roads were blocked, to deliver me safely to Maadi. All the while he was complaining to a foreign stranger about the Mubarak policies that led the people to revolt. I was glad to share my bananas and Panda Puffs with the kids, Yara, Yasmine, and Yassin.

On the way to Maadi, we witnessed the other significant development of that evening, which was emerging extemporaneously in neighborhoods across greater metropolitan Cairo. On the spur of the moment, amid fires, confusion, blocked streets, families driving or walking to safety, and general disorder, citizens took matters into their own hands to direct traffic. This was utterly organic and localized: bottom-up activism. Men at intersections waved us toward the safer routes. Sometimes they peeked at who was in the vehicle. By the time we reached Maadi an hour later, civilian sentries manned almost every intersection. Twenty neighbors on guard

outside my building at a railroad crossing called Mazlaqan Digla nodded me safely indoors. Overnight, they erected makeshift roadblocks from found objects: fencing, buckets filled with concrete and rebar, disembodied car parts, oversized potted plants, tables and chairs. Reacting to events on the spur of the moment, micro-level auto-organization was quite distinct from the demonstrations downtown. It was not necessarily part of the revolutionary movement as such, but certainly an important element in the popular seizure of the commons.

### Occupying the commons: 29 January–2 February

From Maadi we could take the metro to Nasser Station, just north of Sadat Station at Tahrir, and walk the few blocks down along the Egyptian Museum entrance to the square with thousands of others. More and more people assembled in Tahrir Square: thirty thousand, forty thousand, fifty thousand, more. Banners and slogans declared: *Irhal!* (leave), *Batel!* (illegitimate), "Prosecute Mubarak" and "Honor international treaties" (both in two languages), and "Game over" (in English). People chanted in unison: "The people and the army are one" was a popular slogan. Others included "The people want to stomp on the president" and "God is great." Posters displayed photographs of slain martyrs. Egyptian flags, red-white-and-black headbands, and face paint signified nationalism. Little boys were going around collecting "garbage for Mubarak"; the refuse was dumped into a few burned-out vehicle carcasses near the museum, which were then set alight again. Other more serious clean-up brigades appeared, with people wielding brooms and trash bags against the accumulating refuse. Megaphones and drums amplified sound. It was electrifying, but more folksy than choreographed.

February 2 was later dubbed the 'Battle of the Camel' for the mounted thugs who thundered into the square in an absurdly dramatic and excessively brutal but pathetically futile effort to break up the sit-in. I was not there that day. When I returned two days later the level of organization and self-defense was markedly higher. The public geography and architecture of the square evolved quickly. By this time, cell phones and Internet had been restored. Cutting them had not quelled the mass mobilization.

### Self-protection: 3–6 February

As May AbdelRaziq told the "From Tahrir" audience in June, this violent effort to disperse demonstrators spurred civil society to organize

more formally both in Tahrir and in the neighborhoods. In the protest zone, popular committees variously took responsibility for sanitation, emergency medical care, security, food, and other necessities to keep the space viable for the multitudes. Men and women established checkpoints at the several entrances to Tahrir, checking identity cards, searching bags, and patting down entrants. It had been raining, so in addition to blankets and sleeping bags, more people were setting up tents or plastic tarps. Soon, campsites filled the green in the center of the square. Trash collection points were designated at the closed entrances to the metro and a spot just outside the AUC science building. A makeshift emergency medical clinic at the mosque on the southern side of the square was resupplied and staffed by field hospital professionals who volunteered their services. Kitchens and bathrooms were commandeered at several fast-food restaurants on or very near Tahrir whose glass fronts had already been smashed. Arrangements were made for procuring groceries, water, and other supplies. Although no weapons whatsoever were brought into the square, the popular defense committee established one area where volunteer brigades broke up sidewalk bricks and honed them into sharp-edged projectiles intended for self-protection. Sentries were on guard around the clock.

Civil society was very much in motion, then, but not in the ways encouraged or even conceived of by international experts.

The size and density of the Tahrir demonstrations swelled to astounding proportions. A quarter or a half million people were in Tahrir every day; some said numbers peaked at over a million in the afternoons. More and more tents were pitched, in concentric circles spilling beyond the green. The somewhat haphazard security measures were reinforced: rubble, vehicles, and other physical barriers and lines of men created multiple, well-marked concentric circles of resistance against unruly intrusion. Thus the physical layout of the public civic sphere evolved along with its sociology. Different groups set up stages for speeches and performances. By now there were loudspeakers. Large printed banners festooned buildings and bridges. Photographs of the martyrs were everywhere, and one grassy median was dedicated to a vigil for the martyrs. Graffiti decorated paved surfaces. There were songs, with some musical accompaniment: "Baladi," a familiar Egyptian national folk tune, was a favorite. Spaces for public prayers were designated and protected. The iconic popular slogan became "The people

want the downfall of the regime." American and European governments were not in support of this demand.

By now, however, the cameras of Al Jazeera, CNN, and the BBC were trained from balconies in the Semiramis Hotel and other high-rise buildings overlooking Tahrir Square for a panoramic God's-eye view of the scene. Down below, key activists took calls from international journalists. Foreign camera crews and interviewers followed an undergraduate political science student at AUC, Gigi Ibrahim. The eyes of the world were now on Egypt's extraordinary popular assembly in the vast clearing at the heart of its megalopolis. Global audiences were mesmerized by the force of the popular outpouring they could see on television (Carapico 2011).

In neighborhoods, off camera, where groups of men had been rotating guard duty armed with sticks, shovels, or kitchen knives, neighborhood committees formed, too. Prompted partly by rumors of marauding escaped convicts, they reinforced community defense. Simultaneously, other specialized popular committees routinized street cleaning, traffic direction, and emergency services during the curfews imposed from 5:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. They kept tabs on the positioning and movement of Defense Ministry tanks through the neighborhoods and monitored deserted police stations. Groups of high-school students in particular collected garbage and swept streets clean, and would soon begin repainting the curbs.

During this time, the ruling party apparatus spread rumors of foreign instigation of the protests. Foreign news reporters and human rights monitors were harassed, and there were instances of intimidation, detention, and mistreatment. Mindful of the risks, I personally chose not to burden my Egyptian friends by tagging along with them, lest my presence entangle them in a distracting altercation. So during the eighteen days and on subsequent Fridays through June, I usually went to Liberation Square with resident-expat AUC colleagues. We moved freely and inconspicuously. I was never harassed at all. To the contrary, my personal experience of the revolution was quite charmed. I felt protected by the neighborhood watch teams, both in Maadi and in Zamalek where I sometimes spent the night. In Tahrir Square, people smiled or welcomed me by the hundreds if not thousands. (When I had friends visiting as actual tourists on a long-planned visit from London in March, they were greeted warmly, asked their opinions, and invited to pose for countless cell-phone photographs.) The spirit of solidarity was contagious.

### Persistence and determination: 7–11 February

Egypt's military played a role in the uprising that toppled Mubarak with few parallels in other revolutionary situations. Tahrir's demonstrators embraced the soldiers positioned around the perimeter of the square. People kissed them and gave them flowers. The Egyptian colloquial slogan "The people and the army are one hand" was utterly vernacular, and for a time it seemed that saying it could make it come true. Tanks and soldiers stationed just beyond Tahrir Square and at other locations also shaped the new revolutionary urban landscape. Soldiers manned some of the checkpoints at the entrances to Tahrir, particularly from the north toward the Egyptian Museum and the 6 October Bridge. People spray-painted the tanks or climbed on top to pose for pictures. By this time there was a relatively festive atmosphere in the square, especially in the daytime. The nights, especially the evening of Thursday 10 February, when Mubarak gave a speech to the nation in which he disappointed the demonstrators by not resigning, could be tense and uncertain. Perhaps ironically, while tens of thousands defied the curfew by camping out in protest zones, neighborhoods and malls were dark and empty but for roaming army tanks and the citizen police who kept the night watch. By now, clearly, those in Tahrir Square were determined to stay until the president did resign. But even on 10 February, or the afternoon of the 11th, it was impossible to predict when that would happen or what would follow.

I had been staying in Zamalek for several days to be closer to the action and friends while avoiding an after-curfew commute. The evening of the 10th I had dinner with two American friends working for international monitoring organizations, whose personal experiences that week had not been as trouble-free as mine, at one of the few restaurants in this usually bustling part of town that were still serving food; we were the only customers, and the lights were dimmed. Our cell phones kept ringing, especially after the president's speech. Despite the good meal I went to sleep dejected and awoke Friday morning full of anxiety. Later in the day I walked with a colleague along the Nile to Qasr al-Nil Bridge, crossed, waited with the throngs to pass through a series of civilian and military checkpoints, and joined the demonstration. Once again it was uplifting, because people were still optimistic, holding their banners high and shouting their slogans loudly. "Raise your head high," one mantra ran, "you are Egyptian." After a few hours we wove our way out of the crowd again to be back in Zamalek by sundown.

As it happened, I was getting into a taxi to go to Maadi when the news broke that the president had resigned. I was driven through Opera Square toward Giza as waves of jubilant youth and whole families streamed into the streets waving flags, blowing horns, cheering, and throwing flames from cans of hairspray using cigarette lighters. When we got to the usually sleepy but central Victoria Square in the Digla area of Maadi, a spontaneous street party of a few thousand neighbors lit up the traffic circle. Evidently there were similar celebrations throughout Cairo and Egypt.

## Conclusions: Homegrown and Organic

In this essay I have offered a theoretical argument, a critique of civil society promotion, and a political point. The theoretical argument is that civil society needs to be understood as an arena of engagement, not a set of organizations. By this line of reasoning, in Egypt the popular seizure of the commons has constituted a kind of civic revolution, a genuine reconfiguration of public engagement, an extraordinary, earth-shattering, take-to-the-streets moment. It will be significant regardless of the outcome of the next phase of Egyptian politics, whether or not democracy is achieved, and even if stratospheric levels of popular engagement are unsustainable. The 2011 Egyptian Revolution, along with the movements in other Arab countries, ought to liberate our understanding of civil society from the narrow confines of formal membership in organizations with offices and bank accounts. We will, in the future, give much more attention to the potential for public-spirited individual and networked activities to have transformative effects, and scholars will spend a long time now discovering the ways in which civic culture and spaces of public expression in Egypt have been revolutionized by the heady experience of being part of a *sha'ab* as never before.

As for the critique of the bureaucratic framing of civil society as organizations that file quarterly reports, I have suggested that international democracy promotion efforts have been largely irrelevant to the anti-authoritarian rebellions in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, and Libya. Expert transitologists from the United States and elsewhere are now designing projects to facilitate an orderly transition to democracy in Egypt, and meeting quite a lot of resistance from the military government, which has vowed to enforce Mubarak-era rules banning international elections monitors, foreign funding of domestic associations, and other

'violations of national sovereignty.' It is not my intention to give policy advice, but since some readers become frustrated with critical analysis of programs not accompanied by any better ideas, here's a radical concept: instead of inviting activists to come indoors to attend round-table workshops, perhaps American or other foreign experts could explain some of the basic principles and practices of democracy to career military officers who are making political decisions about constitutions and elections for which they have no professional training or experience.

Egypt may not have had a political revolution that unseats the ruling class. There is little evidence that the country is headed toward a full-fledged socioeconomic revolution that will redistribute wealth and power from the privileged elite to the teeming lower classes. Whether or not the country is experiencing a transition to democracy remains an open question. Nonetheless, there has been what might well be termed a civic revolution. Diverse, raucous popular forces have appropriated public civic realms and proclaimed ownership of the commons. Citizens have taken charge of street corners, public squares, expression in cyberspace, and channels of communication with global audiences. This has been and will continue to be a contentious, even messy process. Regardless of the outcome, it has wreaked havoc with the regulatory and disciplinary regimens of both the Cairo bureaucracy and international 'civil society promotion' programs. Many Americans empathized from afar with the revolutionary aspirations of the pro-democracy demonstrators and also the mostly non-revolutionary solidarities of neighborhood defense or betterment committees. I hope my first-person account deepens that empathy, but also that how I have told the story makes clear that this was a civic uprising of, by, and for Egyptians.

## Notes

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