

“You'll be late for the revolution!”

An anthropologist's diary of the Egyptian Revolution

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permanent address: <http://www.samuli-schielke.de/latefortherevolution2011.pdf>

Foreword

This is the diary of one week (much too short although it felt so long) that I spent in Egypt in the middle of the popular revolution that began on 25 January 2011 and that at the time of writing this is still continuing - to an uncertain direction. Ever since the demonstrators filled the streets on 25 January I felt that I should really be in Egypt, a country where I have many friends and to which I feel very bound through more than twelve years during which I have been studying, doing research, and living with the people of Egypt. On 28 January, as millions went out all over the country, I booked my ticket to Cairo for a short visit, with the aim of making myself an idea of the atmosphere, of the sensibility of life of an uprising that had completely taken me by surprise. As an anthropologist, my work in the last years has focussed on the aspirations people have, the frustrations they experience, and the ways they try to find to live a life of dignity under constantly frustrating conditions. But I had not taken seriously the possibility that there would emerge a sudden collective consciousness that it is actually possible to change these conditions. Just days before 25 January, a friend asked whether there could be a revolution in Egypt like there was in Tunisia, and I said no, I don't think so, because it seems so difficult to mobilise the people in Egypt, and for decades people have expected a revolution to break out in Egypt, but it hasn't. Well, now it has, and much of what I thought I knew about Egyptian society has to be revised. But much more than revising academic knowledge is now at stake, and the short week I spent in Egypt from 31 January to 6 February also has changed me and my priorities. Last autumn, as an Egyptian journalist told me that he expects a revolution in Egypt soon. I replied that I don't think so, and that in any case, revolutions are a tricky business where things get broken, people get killed and in the end, the wrong people come into power. The strange thing is that all of this may actually be true of the Egyptian revolution as it is happening - but regardless of that I flew to Egypt, and in the course of a week I transformed from an anthropological observer sympathetic with the events, into an activist committed to the sake of revolution even at personal risk. Personal and political transformation often go hand in hand.

One of the most important lessons I have learned during this week is the importance of friendship and support. I have been sheltered, fed, advised, encouraged, and at times also protected by a great number of people in Egypt, and their determination to change their lives and their society to the better has inflicted me with the same spirit. And I have had good friends to spend time with. As long as the outcome of the events is open, I cannot yet mention their names. I owe many thanks also to all the people who have updated my reports online and passed on the news, especially but not only Daniela Swarowsky, Nazan Maksudian, Jorma Mattila, Piia Onodera, Sonja Hegasy, Kaisa Nyberg, Anne Brandstetter. The biggest thanks, however, are due to all the people of Egypt who found the trust in the possibility of changing their situation instead of coping with it.

Tuesday, 25 January 2011: Prelude in Berlin

Big day of demonstrations in Egypt, on massive scale, all over the country, demanding Mubarak and his system to go. Amazing. I wish I were there. Following the news and footage uploaded by the people on the net much of the evening. Chatted with B. who just came back from the demonstration. He told that the police was very brutal. He also said that he was very happy he was there, because this may not happen again in his lifetime. Tomorrow he is going again.

How much this changes everything. How completely a day like this can change the image I have been drawing lately of people stuck in the circle of living in a frustrating system that turns every promise into pressure and every subversion of the system into a part of the system. Now there is a moment when they glimpse hope, the impossible suddenly appears in a hand's reach, a different step can be taken than could be taken just weeks and days ago, and the world changes a little.

Even if this revolution will be crushed (but I am optimistic), this glimpse of hope, this moment in which a path opens where a wall just stood, is something to hold, much like B. said when I chatted with him. Here an excerpt:

B.: "This is a joyful thing. This is a day one can rarely see."

I ask on Police:

B.: "Really, they were brutal, but in a wicked way."

Samuli: How?

B.: "They let the big demonstration run, and collected people in the narrow side streets. And the mobile phone networks are offline. They threw lightbulbs on the demonstrators from the roofs, and beat up people in the side streets, and arrested them."

Samuli: But you went out anyway, and in big numbers all over the country. That didn't happen since 1919.

B.: “Yes. The people want to do something real. Instead of letting the Police Day (25 January, a public holiday in Egypt) a day of rest to celebrate the police, the people decided that it would be a day the police never forgets. Really, I was happy that I participated in something like this. Because maybe it won’t happen again in my lifetime.”

Sunday, 30 January 2011: “You’ll be late for the revolution!”

Frankfurt airport, 10:30 a.m..

After long hesitation, made yesterday night the decision to fly to Cairo after M. had assured me that it is safe in Giza. The flight had been rescheduled to start at 9:30 a.m. instead of noon in order to arrive in Cairo in daytime before curfew. I took the early morning ICE to the airport from Mainz where I was staying with friends. Everything went fine, I checked in, but the very instance I arrived at gate B25 where the plane was to depart, the announcement was made that the flight was cancelled. An airline officer of Egyptian origin explained the situation to the approximately 20 to 30 Egyptian passengers: Cairo airport was closed, there was nobody working, no technical staff, no security, no customs, and no planes would start to Cairo today. All flights to Cairo are cancelled. (Later someone who had called people on the airport told that the airport is not yet closed but it is being shut down. The officers and workers are there, but not working. Why is not clear.) The people, of course, were very anxious and eager to get to Egypt whatever way possible, and discussed the problem and the possibilities long with the airline staff.

Heated political discussions evolved as well, focussing on the looting that had happened last night. Everybody was very concerned about the safety of their family, their property, and the general situation in Egypt. The opinions went far apart regarding the cause of the problem and the possible remedies. One of the passengers, arriving from the United States said that Egypt is a bunch of 80 million thugs and that if he had been in Tahrir square on Tuesday when the demonstrations began he would have fired into the crowd and killed them by hundreds, and forget about human rights, to stop the chaos at its roots. An older gentleman disagreed, and said that on the contrary Egyptians are good people and should not be accused of the acts of thugs and criminals who exploited the occasion. Another man in his fifties agreed with the first one and said that the whole thing had gotten out of hand because the demonstrations hadn’t been suppressed with a hard hand from the beginning. If the uprising had done anything to these two men, it had confirmed them in their belief that Egypt must be ruled with an iron hand. Others, however, disagreed with them strongly, or avoided getting involved into the debate. I spoke for a longer while with four younger people, one Egyptian woman living in Germany, another on her way from France back to Egypt, a man from Upper Egypt who had lived for four years in the

US and was returning now because he was worried about his family, and an aviation officer who had been abroad for six months. This crowd would not place the blame on the demonstrators, but on the president, most clearly so the woman living in Germany who had decided to return to Egypt in order to participate in the revolution, and who said that this chaos will only stop “when he goes”. Also the aviation officer, who lowered his voice (the people still fear there may be secret police among the passengers) to tell that it costs 8 million pounds just to escort Hosni Mubarak from his residence in Heliopolis to Almaza military airport whenever he goes somewhere, and shared the view that the president should go.

Everybody trying to fly was concerned, worried and anxious. Many had spent the last 48 hours in front of television screens, and many had not slept last night. Also I had only slept three hours. With their very different interpretations of the situation, they all shared a concern for the safety of their families. But when I called M. to tell that I cannot come today, I found him in excellent mood, joyful, even enthusiastic about the situation in Egypt, and telling me: “What a pity! You’ll be late for the revolution!” He had collected revolution souvenirs: shells of tear gas grenades, broken bottles, and much more, and he is looking forward to show them to me tomorrow.

Our flights are rescheduled for tomorrow 8:30. Lufthansa will try to fly to Cairo as soon as they can to bring home the people stranded on Cairo airports - there were thousands, even tens of thousands of them, somebody told. But it won’t be today.

Monday, 31 January 2011:

“That was the first day in my life I felt that I live a natural human life.”

On the plane from Frankfurt to Cairo, against all odds, and most of all against my own strong scepticism whether it really is a good idea to go to Egypt now. Returning from the airport and following the news about the previous night’s looting and anarchy, and the terrible death toll of Friday night, when in many cities the security appears to have been shooting to kill at the demonstrators with live ammunition, I became very worried. But when I called M. and J. they were both telling that it is safe to come - M. says that the looting has probably been heavily exaggerated, and at least in Giza things are actually working better than ever without the police, now that the citizens have taken over control of the public order. Young boys and old men are guiding the traffic in Midan al-Mahatta. M. is delighted. J. reports from Imbaba on a similar note: The previous night was “scary”, with thugs on the streets, but Sunday was fine. She was in the demonstration in Tahrir square but returned home before sunset for fear of looters, but this time it was calm, she said, and children were playing football on the Corniche road because

there was very little traffic. Demonstrators had cleaned up their own garbage, the streets were really clean. The police force was announced to returned to the streets, J told, "but we don't need them." A European friend of mine flew to Cairo last night on Turkish airlines, and I had made my going or not going dependent on whether he would be able to get out of the customs. It all went fine, he told on the phone, and it was also easy to get a taxi at the airport.

Still, I was undecided, and I was undecided even when I took the train to the airport and checked whether my flight was going - it was, but half an hour earlier than had been announced the previous day, so I had to hurry. I called Daniela, she said go but be really careful, and I made my decision: I shall go but be really careful. If I hadn't been in such a hurry I might have stayed. But my feet took me to the plane and there I was.

I am not the only foreigner on the plane, but almost everybody is Egyptian. The plane is half full - there are many more passengers than were standing at the gate yesterday, but still not that many. This is the first Lufthansa flight to Cairo in three days. I also recognise many of the people who were at the gate yesterday. A very varied crowd. Wealthy looking middle aged men, I imagine them to be perhaps businessmen, some maybe also Egyptian diplomatic service, who knows. The young folks I met yesterday are all there, including the young woman who is going to Cairo to participate in the revolution. A couple of men with recognisably trimmed Muslim brotherhood beards were hurrying for the plane along with me - I guess they, too, are going for the revolution. Right now, this an uprising for everybody who wants to join. If it will be successful, the big question is what shape the new order shall have. Unlike at the gate yesterday, on the plane today there are no political discussions.

On the plane, there are many business class and even first class passengers, so the rich of Egypt are not only escaping, as some did in the past days, crowding at the VIP terminal in the Cairo airport according to international news.

The rest is expectation, speculation, tense anticipation. When I arrive I will know more.

Of course, I can forget about working on my publications this week. I will do it at another time.

Later the same evening, In Cairo!

I can hardly believe it, and I'm very happy I came here. It is amazing, and much better than I expected. I am so happy that I see something like this in my life.

I took a taxi cab to Cairo together with L., an Egyptian artist living in Germany. She decided to go to Egypt after her brother disappeared in the demonstrations on Friday. Since then her mother has been going through mosques and hospitals looking for him, and her father has been completely broken down. She didn't speak it out, but it seems very possible that he has been killed. She was coming to Egypt partly to participate in the revolution, partly to search for her brother. She had not told her parents she was coming in order not to make them worry.

The taxi overcharged us extremely. But we were happy to get to town before the curfew would make movement slow (the curfew is not imposed in a strict sense. Instead, from 3 p.m. the army makes roadblocks where they check the ID of passengers and what the cars carry, and ask where they are going. But they commonly do let the cars pass - the few cars there are out in the streets in the evening). The taxi driver was at height of the situation, but from a sarcastic distance. When L. asked him: "Did you demonstrate?" He said: "Am I stupid?" He seemed to think that while the demonstrations were legitimate, it would be foolhardy nonsense to participate in them, and he also warned her about going out in the evening, claiming that Saturday night had witnessed not only looting but also cases of rape. She wasn't impressed.

The city as we saw it from the taxi saw much better than what I had expected from television images that had been showing destroyed shops and streets covered with wreckage. On the way, we saw three buildings burned down - the police station in Azbakiya burned down by demonstrators, a hospital in Galaa Street burned by looters (luckily no one inside got hurt), and the National Democratic Party headquarters that stood out as a black skeleton right next to 6 October bridge, the most impressive sign of people's hatred of the system.

The taxi left L. at her place in Muhandisin, and I continued to Giza where I walked from Corniche down the Mahatta street. Here, for the only time, I saw riot debris on the street: broken glass in different colours and tear gas shells. Otherwise the streets were mostly carefully cleaned up after the demonstration (except for burned police trucks that stand at major squares all over the city). It was in fact much cleaner than it is otherwise in Egypt, and all this due to voluntary effort. In Muhandisin, I saw from the taxi three young women with distinctly upper class looks cleaning up the street. In Muhandisin most shops were closed, but in Mahatta Street in old town Giza the shops were open and the streets full of people. I met Y. on the street, we walked home where I just quickly left my bags, talked shortly with Y. who told how he was covering for the newspaper he works for the demonstration in Giza where ElBaradei was participating. Y. got beaten there, had to run, and filmed while running.

At 4 p.m., one hour after curfew, I hail a taxi at Mahatta Street to take me to the newspaper where M works. The driver is at first hesitant because there is a military roadblock at Cairo University. But the roadblock turns out very fine. They check papers and look into the trunks but let people pass. Most

importantly, they speak to the citizens with a friendly and polite tone that is completely different from that of the police force who routinely insult and abuse the citizens. Also later, when we return from the demonstration on foot, we are twice controlled by soldiers who say: "Excuse me, sirs" and politely check that we are not armed. Some contrast to the "son of a bitch" that Egyptians are used to hearing from their police force. No wonder the military is extremely popular and has been very successful in imposing peace and order wherever they are.

There is army all over the city. At every major corner, place or junction, there is at least a tank or an armoured vehicle, sometimes two or three. The soldiers - conscripted young men who might have otherwise been demonstrating - appear very relaxed, and the people treat them in a very friendly and respectful way. Many are getting themselves photographed in front of the tanks, and in Tahrir square the tanks are covered with anti-Mubarak graffiti.

I pick up M. at his work, we drive with the taxi through almost empty streets to 6 October bridge next to the burned-down NPD headquarters. M. picks up a flattened Pepsi can and gives it to me as a souvenir. Washing your face with vinegar or cola helps against the effects of tear gas. M.: Just before they cut the internet we got really good advice from the Tunisians on Facebook how to handle tear gas and other police techniques.

We walk towards Tahrir square and find the place in a very joyful and peaceful atmosphere. On the bridge, someone is flying a kite in the colours of the Egyptian flag. As we walk past control posts by the army and volunteers from among the demonstrators, everybody has to show their ID, in order to prevent police or state security officers from entering the demonstration to cause havoc. This is great: the Egyptian government has developed the ID card to be a perfect window to "see" the citizen. It tells not only the citizen's name and date of birth but also her/his address, marital state, religion, and profession. And by telling the profession it makes it possible to identify plainclothes police and state security officers.

The demonstrators dominate Tahrir square ever since the army entered on Friday night, and they haven't left since. It is an amazing atmosphere, something I have never seen in Egypt before, and would have never expected. It is very joyful and peaceful, there is no central stage for speeches but a number of spontaneous groups chanting improvised slogans, which rhyme well in Arabic, and some of them are real poetry.

There are in my estimate some 10.000 people in the square at one time, but since people are coming and going, it is likely to be more in the course of the day. The crowd is extremely mixed, but politically active people are clearly best presented. There are lots of left wing activists, smart upper middle class folks, Salafis and Muslim brothers, many with the entire family, all chanting against Mubarak: Salafi families with beards and face veils next to left wing activists and artists, old-fashioned intellectuals, and many many more. There is space for everybody in this revolution. There are also really a lot of women,

young and old.

No group dominates. The religious currents are strong and visible, but at the same time there are also lots of slogans that emphasise the unity of Muslims and Christians as Egyptians. The strong presence of the Muslim brothers is something that L. had expressed some concern about while we talked on the plane. She was not very trusting towards the Muslim Brothers and hoped that the Egyptians could be made a little more secular. But that's the nature of popular revolution and democracy: It comes from the people as they are, not the way they should be. There is little question that a democratic Egyptian government will be a more religious one, and a more confrontational one towards Israel. As far as I'm concerned, however, I think that it's less the question who is going to govern Egypt, but how it is governed. And today gave me a lot of hope in this regard. The spontaneous organisation of Egyptians in demonstrations and in residential areas alike is for me the most powerful proof that Egyptians are capable of having a democratic rule. It is really amazing, and many people I speak with are extremely proud of this. Garbage is continuously collected at the demonstration and on the main streets by volunteers in a country that until now has been full of garbage anywhere you turn. People are guarding the streets where until recently they were dependent on and subject to a brutal and inefficient police force. If this momentum can be held, and turned into a constant dynamic, it will radically change Egypt.

In Tahrir square I meet my European friend who arrived this morning on Turkish Airlines, and also K. who - like everybody else - says that he wouldn't have expected this. He tells that even in small towns in Upper Egypt the police station has been burned and people have taken over the public order, and unlike K.'s fears this has not lead to confessional tensions but, at least for the moment, unity and cooperation. His only worry is that the system may still resort to brute force, even bruter than on Friday, when they feel cornered by the people. This is also a concern expressed by Y., although everybody is relieved and reassured by the declaration of the army that they will not use force against the demonstrators. But there is still the President's Republican Guard.

On the square, some men who look like working class from the popular districts, show me mobile phone footage of the storming of Qasr al-Nil bridge by demonstrators on Friday, where a man is shot into his face with live ammunition and killed immediately. M. tells that he was going with a big group of demonstrators through Zamalek where they gave a special honorary visit to the Tunisian embassy, but afterwards on the bridge they were attacked very violently by the police, and M. saw one man dying from bullets of the police, and many others wounded.

The cutoff of Egypt from the internet is a trouble - only people who can pay for accessing foreign dialup servers with a mobile phone have any connection at all - and people have difficulties to stay informed. In the absence of internet, al-Jazeera plays a key role, and after its hesitation on the first day of

protests it has shifted fully to the side of the demonstrators, and has become the most important source of critical information in Egypt. Yesterday, Al-Jazeera was cut off on Nilesat, and since then Egyptians have realigned their satellite dishes to another satellite that continues to show Al-Jazeera. On Tahrir square three television sets have been set up for the people to view it, and there is a tent where some leftist activists collect digital video footage and photographs. M. laughingly tells that when Al-Jazeera was disconnected his son turned to a serious opponent of the president because Mubarak disconnected him the Cartoon Network which could only be seen on Nilesat.

Tomorrow is the next big demonstration, named the March of Millions. As M and I leave the demonstration and walk all the way to Giza for the lack of taxis or minibusses, we join a group of people coming our way, lead by a woman wearing a colourful variant of niqab, accompanied by another woman in jeans and open hair, and shouting in very loud voice: "The people - want - the removal of the president!" We join, and M. starts chanting (I never knew he has such a loud voice): Tomorrow at nine! Million tomorrow! Million tomorrow at nine! Peaceful demonstration tomorrow!

We walk a long way through Dokki and Giza. In Dokki there are some few policemen here and there - the police force returned to Cairo last night, but in small numbers, it seems - but they are still looked at with utter suspicion. The streets are remarkably clean, but here and there stand burned police trucks, in Giza at least five or six of them in a long line.

The most amazing thing is that nobody expected this. Just two weeks ago someone asked me whether Egypt could experience a revolution like in Tunisia, and I said no, Tunisia may be followed by Yemen, but there won't be a revolution in Egypt. I couldn't have been more wrong. M. says that he, too, didn't believe in it. On Tuesday, he didn't even want to join the demonstrations, thinking there was no point. But he soon changed his mind. We walk to Giza with a young man from old Giza who is very excited about the new situation. He tells he also didn't believe in the demonstrations of Tuesday - he went there not believing that others would go. He describes the feeling: Until few days ago I felt that I live in a nightmare, and suddenly I could dream freely. M.: "Things became possible that I couldn't have imagined. Suddenly we can make a difference."

This is the revolutionary moment, the same "psychological state" L. described when I talked with her on the plane to Cairo. Egyptians have so long lived in a sense of oppression, a sense of frustration and pressure, they have hated the system but felt that there is nothing you can do. They have subverted the system by being chaotic and lazy, diverting the system to their ends, but all this has in turn become the system, encapsulating them in a highly frustrating state of suffering from a corrupt system and at the same time being a part of it. Suddenly the revolution in Tunisia opens a door of possibility, rejecting the system becomes something that makes sense, there is a point to it. In one night, the country changes.

The future will show how successful and deep this change can be - not everybody shares the euphoria, and some problems Egypt suffers from are not solved by changing the government - but even the mere existence of this trust in the possibility that one can do something and it will make a difference has been enough to fill the squares with demonstrators, to burn down the police stations known for torture of prisoners, to clean the streets afterwards and to put a quick end to the looting.

But not everybody is sharing equal enthusiasm. I also meet people who are either more modest in their demands, or more sceptical about the possibility of getting rid of Mubarak and the system. The guy at the mobile phone shop where I got my phone card said: Isn't this what we wanted - we got a new government. A customer says no, we want more, he must go. Tomorrow we all go to the March of the Millions! And at night as we stand for a while at Giza square, I talk with a man who gives the government full blame for the whole looting and chaos and hates the system, but still believes that Mubarak won't go, he will stick no matter what we do. "It's now worse than ever. Now we are forced to fight Egyptian against Egyptian, check each others on roadblocks, what way of living together is this?"

After a long walk, we reach old town Giza, and go to buy vegetables at the market which is still partly open at 7:30 p.m., with groups of men guarding the streets and shops with knives and sticks in their hands - the same scene that can be seen all over the city. As we are buying beans and macaroni in a shop, screaming women run past us on the alley, followed by adolescents with sticks and knives in their hands. Looters have been sighted, there is commotion, all the adolescents are about to run after them, but the older men stop them and say: Don't all run the same way! Idiots, half of you must stay at the other end of the alley! The women return and say that one thief got away, the other was caught. But is not clear whether this really happened. A vegetable vendor says: There were looters here from the first night, but mostly it's false alarms, people see someone running, scream "thief" and then everybody screams and runs.

We arrive at home, greeted by M's son enthusiastically shouting "The people! want! the removal of the president!". I talk with Y. about his participation in the demonstration on Friday, his first one so far:

"This feeling of dignity was something I wanted to write about to everybody on Friday, but there was no internet. That was the first day in my life I felt that I live a natural human life. I got up, I had breakfast, I prayed, I went out to the demonstration and said "no!" even though I got beaten up, I called my sweetheart, I went home and slept. This was the first day in my life that I had nothing missing."

In the evening, as we eat and sit with al-Jazeera running on TV, important announcements follow in rapid pace. First the army declares that they recognise the legitimate demands of the demonstrators and will not use force against peaceful demonstrators. Half an hour later Omar Sulayman makes a

declaration that in effect means that the current parliament that was based on completely false elections will be dissolved and new elections will be expected, and that the president has given him the authority to negotiate with all political powers. After this news, the moderators on television 1 become really nervous, one phone call with a journalist from al-Ahram is abruptly interrupted as the person at the other side of the line says that this means that the project of hereditary rule is definitely over. One can really see how the pressure is growing on the system - interestingly always late in the evening. The revolution won't happen in Egypt while Obama is still sleeping...

**Tuesday, 1 February 2011:
 “This is more than I could have ever dreamed of.”**

Late in the evening, at M.'s place, exhausted, waiting for Mubarak to speak on television shortly. Since an hour we are back from the biggest demonstration in the history of Egypt so far [note afterwards: It was only the second biggest. The biggest was the Friday of Anger on 28 January, but I didn't know it at the time of writing]. It not only filled Tahrir Square completely - the people did not even all fill into the square, and the demonstration extended to much of downtown Cairo around it. News speak about one or two million people, how many there really were is guesswork, but in any case they were so many more than either I or anybody else could imagine in their wildest dreams.

This day was one of the most amazing things I have ever experienced. It was perfectly peaceful, perfectly organised by spontaneous volunteers who took care of order, security, cleanliness. The people behaved in a very peaceful and reasonable way, and there was an amazing shared sense of dignity and power. Whatever will come after this will fall short of the expectations today (because the people demonstrating have completely different political views, and because reality is always trickier than the revolutionary moment), but whatever political system, whatever government Egypt will have, it will face citizens who share the experience of going out and making the unimagined reality. This is what this day has taught to me and millions of Egyptians demonstrating in Cairo and all major cities around the country - and also their families and friends to whom they are tonight telling about their experience: The moment people have the trust and the power to cross the limits of the possible, they may get further than they ever dreamed of. This is what F. whom I met at Talaat Harb square told me: “This is more than I could have ever dreamt of.” And he is a long-standing communist activist who has had some lofty dreams. Such pride, such determination, such sense of dignity, such sense of power, and such joy prevailed today in the centre of Cairo that I cannot write about it tonight without becoming very emotional. Not a moment for detached analysis.

(While I write this, we are tensely waiting for the announced speech by Mubarak. The expectation is that he will either say that he will not run for the next elections, which will mean the next big demonstration on Friday, or he will resign. We switch to Egyptian television where they show a small group of people with signs saying “Yes to Mubarak” and actually claim that there were two million in the streets of Alexandria demonstrating in support of Mubarak. No wonder everybody in the demonstration was calling home and telling that the situation is completely different from what is shown on television.)

So, and now the events of the day:

I got up early to go along with Y. to pick up his girlfriend A. from a southern suburb where she lives. She is going to the demonstration with the hesitant agreement of her mother, against the will of her brother and without asking her father. But she has promised to come back before curfew, so Y. is responsible for picking her up and bringing her back. In the metro there are few people, most of them men past 40. Young men and women conspicuously few. Almost all of the men talk about the demonstration. There is no other topic of discussion, and spontaneous debates evolve constantly between the passengers. Their views differ: Some consider the demonstration unnecessary or dangerous, others support it, but almost everybody (with the exception of one apparent NPD member) agrees that Mubarak and his system are rotten and must go. We walk through a residential suburb where, like all over Cairo, Citizen’s guards (in arabic *ligan sha’biya*, “people’s checkpoints”) stand at every street corner, with stones and low barricades on the streets to prevent anybody from driving through without being checked first. On the way, I buy newspapers. The newspaper stand has almost only independent or opposition newspapers: *Shorouk*, *Wafd*, *Al-Masri al-Youm*, *Al-Youm al-Sabi’*, and those are the papers people read.

We pick up A. who is equipped with an Egyptian flag and lots of elan and determination. We take the metro back, but it doesn’t stop at Tahrir, and we get out at Gamal Abd an-Nasir and walk. There is a beginning stream of people heading towards Tahrir, the sun is shining and it’s a beautiful morning. In Ramses street we see burned police trucks with graffiti like “down with the tyrant” sprayed on them. As we approach Tahrir the crowds quickly increase, and we walk down Champollion Street where cafes are open and full of demonstrators having a break.

At the entrance to Tahrir we again have to show our ID and we are controlled for weapons. There is a separate row for women with women volunteers doing the checking. There are several lines of control, and everybody is very polite, they say “Excuse me”, “Sorry about this”, and everybody is very happy about this measure. They feel that it is a great contribution to their safety (and a necessary one, if the report by al-Jazeera is true that later this evening a car loaded with automatic weapons was stopped at one of the checkpoints). Where there is army, they do a part of the controlling, but mostly it is

entirely volunteers. And as the demonstration grows in the course of the day, new checkpoints extend out to the streets, as far as beyond Talaat Harb Square, with men forming human chains to guide people to the checkpoints. Although there are possibly more than a million people (it is all guessing - nobody knows) out in downtown, these controls work well throughout the day and the evening.

We arrive at Tahrir Square around 11 a.m., and it is already much more crowded than it was yesterday. In the course of the next three hours it becomes so full that it becomes difficult to move although it's a big square. We stand, watch, chant with the crowd, I make many photographs, and many Egyptians ask me about my opinion, and I tell them what I think, and add that I am here to demonstrate against the European governments that support dictators while talking about democracy. Y. hopes that people would agree on chanting one slogan, but it is impossible due to the huge size of the demonstration. And at two occasions I see heated discussions between demonstrators around the issue of the slogans. Later my European friend tells me that last night there was some disagreement on the same issue. All groups have agreed to suspend the use of any slogans of particular parties or movements, but sometimes people are tempted.

For half an hour, Y. collects garbage, and he does it with extreme dedication and determination. Then Y. and A. leave early to take her home. I walk towards Talaat Harb street on the sidewalk that is separated from the square with a fence. The fences around the square create some difficult bottlenecks, and it gets very crowded at one moment, so crowded that I start to worry how many people the square can take. I stand for a while next to the armoured vehicle parked at the entrance of Talaat Harb street, and then walk down Talaat Harb street where shortly a rumour is spread that Mubarak has resigned, but it is quickly debunked. I meet my European friend, and we go around Tahrir square and then walk around in downtown, have coffee, and on the way meet many friends. Joyful encounters in an exceptional mood of hope.

At last I meet M. again he had to go to work in the morning, and he had arrived at the demonstration in the afternoon. He was exhausted. We went together to the apartment of a friend in downtown to go to the bathroom, and stayed shortly for a drink, very welcome. But we soon headed home, expecting that we will have to walk all the way. But luckily we got a ride by a man who was driving around in his car with his wife and daughters along with him, making a little side business from picking up passengers. Good mood, and everybody is happy and proud about the good manners and politeness of the citizens' guards.

Much more than a revolution of Facebook or Twitter, this is a revolution of mobile phones. All day long, people at the demonstration keep talking to their mobile phones, telling to their friends or family that the situation is completely unlike what Egyptian television tells (in the afternoon, they apparently tried to scare people with warnings about clashes and new

looting), and that the demonstration is huge and peaceful. The government is trying to keep the citizens in the dark by all means possible. Internet is down since Friday. Al-Jazeera has been repeatedly taken off Nilesat, and today also Arabsat. Egyptian state television is running a heavy campaign of disinformation.

While I wrote this, Mubarak spoke on television. He will not run for the next term, but otherwise he is defiant and makes no real concessions, on the contrary, he promises a change of the constitution but by the current parliament, and he says that the parliament will only be dissolved after courts have decided whether there must be a new election the challenged seats (400 out of 420 - and this is the same what Omar Suleyman promised yesterday, even less). And he tells that all the people who have been responsible for looting and for causing chaos will be caught by the law. M.'s interpretation: If he doesn't go on Friday, our blood will be shed, and everybody who participated in the demonstrations will be persecuted. He says: It will be Friday now - that is, that's the next big demonstration against Mubarak. Actually what Mubarak said was pretty much exactly what John Kerry had demanded in the US senate just an hour or so earlier. He seems to act under foreign pressure, but he is not moving one step more than he absolutely must.

M. is really angry. The sense of tense expectation gives way to anger, and he is going out to join the demonstration right now. Y. would go as well if he could but he has to stay behind to watch for the safety of M's son and mother. Al-Jazeera shows the people in Tahrir chanting loudly against Mubarak. This will continue. And maybe it won't wait until Friday.

M. just walked out of the door to go back to Tahrir. Y, their mother, M's son and I stay behind, watching television. What will tomorrow bring? This is a critical moment. But I will find it out after getting some sleep.

Wednesday, 2 February 2011:

A very bad night

I'm writing this in the apartment of a friend where we had to retreat as the pro-Mubarak thugs on the streets of downtown Cairo were becoming increasingly aggressive this afternoon. This is a report of a day that began in indecisive but optimistic mood, but turned into mob violence evidently initiated and organized by the government. Evidence follows.

As I left my friend's apartment in Giza, I found people all over the city again discussing and debating intensely, some firmly in support of the protests or at least against Mubarak, some against the protests and for Mubarak, and also many who found that Mubarak had shown responsibility and character with his speech last night. But as I got closer to Tahrir Square, I also saw that there was some real hatred in the air, as men from the car workshop area in

Champollion street interrupted a family on their way to Tahrir, telling that it is not a place for women to go, and that what they were doing is a shame. One of the local guys got really upset - his shop had been looted, he said - and a heated argument - almost a fight - evolved, with the accusations "thieves!" and "police informer!" being shouted. The people in the workshop area had been hit hard by the looting and even harder by the curfew and had begun to blame the pro-democracy protesters.

As I arrived on Tahrir Square, I found a small but loud pro-Mubarak demonstration trying to enter the square but being prevented from doing so by the police. On the square, there were still (or already) lots of people, more than on Monday but of course much less than yesterday in the big demonstration. There the atmosphere was a good deal more nervous and tense than yesterday that was really like a popular street festival, but demonstrators were streaming in again bit by bit, and the square was slowly filling for a new day of peaceful demonstrations demanding Mubarak to resign.

As I left the square towards downtown Cairo, however, I encountered a different atmosphere – no pro-democracy demonstration here, instead, some shops were opening and many people walking in the streets. As I reached 26th of July Street, one of central Cairo's major streets, I encountered more pro-Mubarak demonstrations, consisting of people driving on top of trucks and chanting "mish ha yimshi!" ("He won't go", in contrast to the pro-democracy slogan "We won't go until he goes!") At first these were small groups, but bit by bit they succeed gathering spontaneous participants as well, and in the course of an hour, they developed into huge mass marches through the streets. Many cars and busses were honking their horns and people are waving Egyptian flags. Quite suddenly, an air of enthusiasm and relief overcame the people in the street. Some were there to show their support to Mubarak, but many others are more differentiated: They were happy that Mubarak has promised not to run for presidency and confident that there is going to be democracy and new parliamentary elections. They thought that Mubarak has heard the voice of the people, and that he shouldn't go immediately but there should a period of well-ordered transition, and people should stop demonstrating and everybody should go back to work.

If this momentum had prevailed, if the pro-Mubarak demonstrations had developed the way the people I talked with were hoping, this might indeed have been a starting point to the ordered democratic transition many of the pro-Mubarak demonstrators were looking forward to. Unfortunately, the Egyptian government had different plans, as some of my friends had already guessed. As I stood at the streetcorner, a man came with his young son on his way from Tahrir. I told him what was going on and said that my only fear is that it may turn into violence against the pro-democracy protest. He said: "That's what will happen", turned around and told me that he is going back to Tahrir Square.

The Pro-Mubarak demonstration was clearly organised by the government, with trucks with loudspeakers and pictures of Mubarak riding through the streets and distributing photocopied paper sheets in handwriting saying “Yes to Mubarak, no to destruction.” But it gained genuine popular support and there were really a lot of people spontaneously joining the march for Mubarak. But the people I talked to were also positively peaceful, they were out for the return of peace, and it was clear that they had no intention to go to attack the anti-government demonstrators. However, as I walked down Talaat Harb street down to Tahrir, the demonstrators there were much more aggressive and much more organised than the crowd who spontaneously joined the big marches towards Muhandisin and the TV centre in Maspiro where the main pro-Mubarak demonstrations. Also unlike the people on 26 July streets who willingly and happily got engaged into lively and at times heated discussions and were also very welcoming towards me, the people who gathered in the streets leading to Tahrir square were hostile towards me, especially when my friend, foreigner like me, and I tried to make photographs, to which immediately men among the crowd told us not to make photographs unless we don’t want our camera broken.

At the corner of Bustan and Talaat Harb street we find a tense standoff between pro-democracy demonstrators who stand in a human chain, and pro-mubarak folks moving back and forth, their mood getting more and more heated. One man among them starts to tell me that the people inside are being paid to participate there, how else could they have ID controls and food for so many days. When I say him: “Please, keep peace”, he replies: “It’s them who don’t keep peace!” A man arrives on motorcycle to bring bottles of water and juice to the demonstrators inside. As he tries to enter through the human chain, pro-Mubarak demonstrators grab the boxes, and in a rush that I otherwise know from beggars at main mosques everybody runs for the water and juice, someone shouts: “This is our water!”, the people are fighting to get some of the loot. This stands in a dramatic tension to the determined sense of discipline shown by the pro-democracy demonstrators. A very aggressive atmosphere is building up here, and we decide to move away. We pick up a friend in Bab el-Louq and walk to the apartment of a friend amidst of loud groups walking through the streets and chanting pro-Mubarak slogans. Crazy enough, amidst all this, we find the cafes in the Bursa area full with customers in the middle of all this commotion.

Soon after we reach our friend’s apartment, things start to get worse, the shouts louder. We hear shots, and from the balcony we see a part of the mob bringing somebody they have caught and throwing him in a rude fashion to an army special unit protecting one of the foreign diplomatic sites in the city centre. There is a long confrontation as the pro-Mubarak people are trying to push through the army line but are not left through. We are getting rather afraid as it gets louder and more chaotic in the streets, and the caretaker of the house tells everybody to turn their lights off. Since then we sit in the dark, lights on only in the kitchen. It is out of the question to go to the street. At times, we hear loud noise of things being broken or thrown around along with pro-Mubarak slogans and gunfire. Then things get calm again,

later we hear gunfire from the direction of Tahrir Square. Our friends there tell us on the phone that the situation inside the square is much better than it looks like on television – we are watching Al-Jazeera livestream on the internet. But where we are staying, the situation is very volatile, and we hear that several foreign journalists have been attacked by the pro-Mubarak thugs in the course of the day and the night. Although the people in the square would badly need medicine and food, which we have here, it seems way too dangerous for two foreigners to go out now.

There is no way to predict from here what will come today. There is no question that the government will put the blame on the pro-democracy movement. The question is whether the Egyptians will believe it. A friend from Kitkat on the other side of the Nile where the situation is calm with whom I spoke on the phone said that people in his neighbourhood who until now had been very much supportive of Mubarak, were disgusted by what was going on today. But Egyptians appear very split today, and there is no way to tell what will come. In the last two weeks, every single prediction I have made about the situation has turned out false. Just as I did not expect the protests to become so huge, I did not expect the events today to turn the way they did. The only thing that is sure about the situation now is that Mubarak and his ruling elite are not serious about the orderly transition to democracy, but are again resorting to the tactics of intimidation and chaos. What a horrible and criminal way to rule a country.

Thursday, February 3, 2011: A day of anxious anticipation

As the day turns to evening, we are again sitting in the apartment. Today morning began peaceful but tense, and many people were out in Downtown Cairo, and we could move freely and pay a visit to Tahrir Square. But in the course of the afternoon, government thugs have been spreading on the streets of Downtown Cairo in small but aggressive groups, and friends of ours had to turn back as they tried to get to Tahrir in the afternoon. Many others have been able to reach Tahrir Square through other routes, and a number of people are moving through the streets here right now trying to get to Tahrir – from shouts few blocks away we guess that there are still standoffs going on. We hear occasional gunfire. Through phone calls I know that there are already now more people on Tahrir Square than there were yesterday.

Sitting unable to do anything and trying to guess what the situation is like out in the streets is the worst thing there is, and I feel that I should have rather stayed on Tahrir Square if there is nothing I can do here. But while I write this, BBC tells that the protesters have been able to push pro-Mubarak folks back from the streets leading to Tahrir. Friends from different parts of the city are determined to get to Tahrir Square, and many seem to be successful. Our spirits, which were down just an hour earlier, rise again. One friend says: Tahrir Square is the only place where I feel safe.

Last night was terrible and dramatic, and thinking back to it is amazing now that the demonstrators successfully held it out against the thugs throughout the night.

In the morning some of our friends returned from Tahrir Square, quite exhausted and in urgent need for sleep. One of them had spent all night helping wounded people from the frontline to the hospital. His hands were covered in dried blood. While they got to sleep my European friend and I went out to see how the situation was in Tahrir Square and to buy some food. At early noon the market area of Bab el-Louq near Tahrir square was quite lively and calm, and we could buy some medicine in a pharmacy on our way to the Square that was secured by several human chains and multiple checkpoints of volunteers, many of them carrying bandages on their heads as memories from last night's fight. We found the people inside tense and tired, but still well organised, most of them determined to stay, others uncertain, and everybody expecting a new attack to begin this evening. A stream of new demonstrators was arriving from all directions – except from Abd-el-Mun'im Riyad square where the standoff with the pro-Mubarak thugs continued.

As we were making a quick walk around the square, suddenly I was enthusiastically greeted by an old friend of mine whom I wouldn't have expected to see here. Sheikh N. is an Islamic mystic (Sufi) who spends most of the year setting up his tent and offering free food and lodging to the pilgrims at Muslim festivals around Egypt. But I never thought that he would have anything to do with politics. But here he was in Tahrir Square, having changed his plain white robe and turban for jeans and jacket and demonstrating against oppression since a week by now. He has built his tent in one of the green isles in the square, with some of his supporters along with him. I am delighted to see him. It gives me so much hope.

Determination mixed with anxiety was the mood of the morning and the early afternoon. But there were good signs. As we left Tahrir we saw a police officer (from the criminal or traffic police, not the central security forces who beat up the demonstrators) in uniform joining the protestors – although it did take a while before the protestors were convinced. And as we walked through the streets, most shops had satellite, not Egyptian television turned on. Intense debates continued at every corner, and the short pro-Mubarak euphoria had again given way to a more critical albeit by no means unified mood. At a café where state television was on we saw the new prime minister very apologetic and nervous on television, offering his excuses for last night's violence.

The thug attack at Tahrir has made a lot of people very angry. First thing this morning newspaper delivery cars were all over the city, and independent newspapers showed very dramatic images of thugs on horseback riding into the pro-democracy crowd. These were images that will not be easily forgotten, and they have changed the situation again. One friend who was on Tahrir last night told that in the early morning hours he encountered a man who just arrived to protect the demonstration, telling that after Mubarak's speech on

Tuesday he had believed him and was ready to be content and go home, but after what he had seen on Wednesday, he was back on the street. This gives the people hope, and many say that Mubarak has de facto already fallen, the attack last night was no more by Mubarak, but by the system of oppression trying once more its old tactics of chaos and intimidation. Mubarak has made all concessions he can make. There is nothing left for him to do than to resign. The question is when and how.

This is so far an interim day of anxious expectation between the rapid dramatic events of yesterday and in anticipation of tomorrow when a new big demonstration is announced countrywide. It could be decisive. But first, we will see what the night is going to bring. Maybe some food can be delivered to Tahrir again.

Friday, 4 February 2011: A huge demonstration but uncertain outcomes

Yesterday was again a day of a huge demonstration that filled Tahrir square completely with people calling Hosni Mubarak to resign. You have probably been able to follow the events on television and news better than I have, and I have very little overview of the situation, but maybe I can give some idea about the atmosphere among the demonstrations.

On Wednesday and Thursday night, Downtown Cairo had been a bad place to move around as a foreigner, with pro-Mubarak gangs moving on the streets and reports of foreigners being arrested and sent to the airport. Also at our house we at least once heard people entering the street and asking whether there are foreigners living here, but the men guarding the street said that there weren't any foreigners here and energetically told them to go. On the basis of what we had heard on the street and over the internet we decided that it is wiser to leave the apartment for Zamalek, a very up-market area where there have been no clashes caused by the thugs. From there, our agreement was, some of us would continue to Tahrir and others could stay in the apartment of a friend there. But as we entered the street, it turned out that the situation was again very different from what we had been judging from sitting upstairs. Now the streets of downtown Cairo were full of people heading to Tahrir to demonstrate for democracy, and we spontaneously decided to join them. Without the slightest trouble, we found ourselves at the entrance to Tahrir square where rows of volunteers were checking people's ID's and pockets as they have been doing ever since the demonstrators took over Tahrir Square. But the sight of the street had dramatically changed since we were at this spot a day and a half earlier. Large barricades made of construction site fences now closed the entrance to the square, and in front of these barricades stood an additional line of barbed wire set there by the military. And this had not been a main site of fighting against the pro-Mubarak gangs but only a side scene. As we arrived inside the square, we found a totally different atmosphere, with a continuous stream of people

arriving and bringing with them breakfast for the demonstrators who had spent the night inside, people chanting anti-Mubarak slogans, and the atmosphere optimistic due to the evidently strong response of so many people who had decided to join what the pro-democracy demonstrators called “The Friday of departure”, meaning Mubarak’s departure.

We sat down at the tents in a green traffic isle at the centre of the square, and spent a lot of time talking with the demonstrators there. A young woman from a rich family, speaking to us in very good American English before she found out that we speak Arabic, told that on Tuesday night as Mubarak gave his speech, she was willing to accept it and to go home, but after the attack of the pro-Mubarak gangs with horses and camels (those images really had an effect), she decided to come back today, because it was clear for her that the president was trying to deceive the people. She also said that people had been asking why she goes to demonstrate when her circumstances are good. She said that she didn’t come here for herself, but for those people who have to suffer under the system, and that the system tries to make everybody to think just about their own interests in order to prevent them from taking collective action. A middle aged woman, definitely not from the upper classes like the first one, argued that Mubarak’s speech last Tuesday was an attempt to manipulate the emotions of the people just like Nasser did in 1967. “It’s the same film running again, and repetition makes the lie evident”, she says. Here some background: After the humiliating defeat of Egypt against Israel in the Six-Day-War Nasser held a very emotional speech offering his resignation. The response was overwhelming support by Egyptians demanding the president to stay – a masterpiece of manipulation of the public opinion. On Wednesday after Mubarak’s speech where he said that he will not run again for presidency, a similar mood had encompassed Cairo, and might have prevailed if it hadn’t been for the attack on Tahrir. However, the attempt to continue the old policy of brutal intimidation at the same time by removing the demonstrators from Tahrir has clearly backfired, at least among those pro-democracy supporters who had been at first impressed by Mubarak’s speech. Another story are those who tend to sideline with the system anyway and are skeptical about rapid political change, for example a friend from Alexandria with whom I spoke on the phone. She hoped that everything would remain peaceful said that people should really go home so that the nation can get back to work.

People like her were certainly very likely to be impressed by the disinformation campaign by Egyptian state television yesterday. Obviously I could not follow television on the square, but what I heard over the phone calls was that they were spreading news about small numbers of people in the square and increasing factional fighting. This campaign of disinformation was not restricted to state television, but to some degree took place on the square as well. In the course of the afternoon I followed a young man who kept involving people into discussions where he was raising questions about what will happen when Mubarak resigns and whether people will be able to agree and go home safely, whether the demands are realistic, and making the impression that actually the government had already given in to major

demands and that the demonstrators' determination on the square was becoming futile. Less through his specific opinions than due to his persistence in sharing them with others, I suspected him for being a state security informer sent there to spread doubts among the demonstrators - and with some, he did seem to be successful. But most people were very defiant and determined.

The most determined was a woman from the southern Egyptian city of Sohag who gave an interview to a Belgian newspaper. Because she didn't speak English and journalists didn't speak Arabic, I translated. She was a widowed mother of two sons whom she had brought along here last Tuesday to join the march of the millions. She had no schooling and apparently didn't know to read and write. After her husband died she had opened a travel agency but it had been closed by the government – something that often happens if one doesn't know the right people or pay enough bribes. She would not go until Hosni Mubarak goes, and until the system of corruption and capitalism is overthrown and the power is given to the people. She was here, she said, for the sake of freedom, for the sake of dignity, and in order to feel that this is her country. With few words, she managed to crystallise the sentiment that propels this democracy movement: the sense of dignity and power that emerges from the ability to say no and to stand to one's rights, and the feeling that this country, so long ruled by a system of clientelist exploitation, could belong to its people again. Two men put this very clearly in words to me later the same day as we went to get water (drinking water is widely available on the square, which is crucial for the people's ability to persist). They said: "It's not Hosni Mubarak who has oppressed us for thirty years, it has been we ourselves through our silence. Now we have learned to speak out."

Here a selection of text messages I sent from Tahrir Square during the day (thanks to Daniela for posting!):

11:35: I just saw a Salafi man with a long fundamentalist's beard helping Nawal al-Saadawi, Egypt's most outspoken feminist, to get a comfortable place to sit down in the green traffic isle in the middle of Tahrir Square.

12:35 > Right now Friday prayer on Tahrir, followed by prayer in memory of the dead. The square is completely full with people. It's an amazing sight!

12:50 > The second prayer ends. Everybody - those praying and those not praying - stands up, shouting: "Down, down, with Hosni Mubarak!" "Go away!" "We won't go, he shall go!". The square is getting so full that many people on their way here will probably have to spread to the surrounding streets and bridges.

14:34 > Amr Musa's (former minister of foreign affairs and current secretary general of the Arab League) 2nd attempt to enter the square fails because curious bystanders and press block the cordon through which he is supposed to pass. He turns back again. We shall see whether he will make it to the

speaker's stage.

15:20 > As people were waiting for Amr Musa to enter, a debate ensued among them. Some saw in him Egypt's next president. Some said: "we don't need politicians, this is the people's revolution!".

Huge crowds spoke out their demand for dignity, freedom, and for being able to call this country their own on Tahrir Square on Friday. But the government did not move, except for a statement by the vice president that Mubarak has de facto given up but cannot formally do so under the current conditions. It seemed that the the system is now determined to sit it out, to give in a little bit here and there, but to keep the old elite in charge of the country. So we left Tahrir Square back to our apartment (which was now perfectly safe to reach because it was now only one block away from the extended area controlled by the pro-democracy demonstrators) in a subdued mood. The next morning's newspapers, however, offer a different image. Even the pro-government al-Ahram has yesterday's demonstration as their main news (although they say "hundreds of thousands" instead of "millions" like the independent press does), and the independent press runs extensive coverage of the Tahrir demonstrations yesterday. The impression they give is that change is taking place right now and that there is no way back to the old system. They also inform that "The Friday of Departure" will now be followed by the "Week of Insistence" by the pro-democracy movement.

The revolution has given those sharing in it an amazing spirit, but it has also taken a heavy toll, and many are mentally exhausted. One friend who walks along us as we return from Tahrir says that his girlfriend was killed on the bloody Friday (28 January) when the state violence reached its peak, and that after that he does even know what he feels. He says that he is speaking out the Muslim creed every hour because he expects to die any moment (and he is certainly not a religious man).

Future revolution can learn a lot from the past 11 days' events. Here some lessons to be learned that were highlighted to me by demonstrators:

-A popular grassroots uprising is possible but it requires some organisational and media support. The media support has been offered by al-Jazeera. The lack of organisation hat for a long time been the main asset of the movement because it could not be stopped by arresting or shooting its leaders – there are no leaders, and many of the people in Tahrir do not want leaders. They want power to the people. They want leaders elected in free parliamentary election. This grass-roots dynamics means, however, that while the demonstrators are well able to clean the garbage, to keep order, and to defend themselves – all actions that make immediate sense – they are not good at making tactical manoeuvres, while the government is employing various and often contradictory tactics to sustain the revolution.

-The revolutionary movement must be able to occupy the government media. That the television centre in Maspiro has remained firmly in the hands of the

government has left a key instrument of power in the system's hands. Actually the demonstrators in Alexandria even sent a message to Cairo, suggesting that the Tahrir demonstrators should occupy the TV centre. But to occupy it (it is less than a kilometre away) would require a carefully and secretly planned attack, and the pro-democracy demonstrators are both too peaceful and too spontaneous to take part in such an attack.

-The revolutionary movement needs good loudspeakers. The extremely bad quality of the PA at Tahrir Square makes it impossible to share speeches and announcements with all the people on the square. Even sitting just fifty metres away from one of the two speakers's stages I could usually not understand what was being said.

Saturday, February 5, 2011

A day of contradictory news

As I am finally back in my Egyptian friend's apartment in Giza after a day of visiting people in different parts of Cairo, there is nothing left to do than watching the news, and the news are contradictory.

The worst news of the day just arrived, citing the US special envoy saying that Mubarak should stay in power to oversee a peaceful political transition. [Later in the evening, however, Washington declared that this had been his private opinion.] Knowing what Mubarak's government has done against its people in the last days, shooting them dead, terrorising them by allowing widespread looting, and systematically deceiving them on state media, this is a fatal error that may open the door to the ruling system to establish itself again. Mubarak's record is scandalous and criminal to say the least, and to assume that he of all people would be a suitable person to guarantee a democratic transition a delusion.

There are other, better news. The demonstration on Tahrir Street was big again today. They show no sign of going home. And the demonstrators have named a group of ten public personalities who will speak in their name, which will make it possible to make some of those tactical manoeuvres that will be so important in the following days and weeks. And unlike Egyptian television, the press - even some government papers, which surprised me - is reporting very positively about the demonstrations. The ruling National Democratic Party has removed several of its most notorious figures from the party politbureau, including Hosni Mubarak's son Gamal Mubarak. The new head of the politbureau is Husam Badrawi who is one of the few respectable people in the NDP. He failed in the last parliamentary elections due to one of the most spectacular cases of fraud in a round of elections that were all a fraud anyway. This could be read as a good sign, but more likely it is just another superficial concession to keep the ruling elite in power. The NDP, we must remember, is not a political party in the proper sense, but an organ of

an authoritarian government.

The weather today has been cold and overcast with occasional rainshowers, which well reflects the subdued mood of the day. Cairo is returning to normality everywhere except on Tahrir square, the streets are again full of people and cars, and shops are opening. Normality is what Mubarak has promised to Egyptians, and many Egyptians are welcoming it, also many of those who went out and withstood the brutal police force on the Friday of Anger on 28 January (which, by the way, was probably the by far biggest day of demonstrations in the history of Egypt, but because internet and mobile phones were blocked, much of the images from that day haven't reached the media). But normality is also in favour of the demonstrators in Tahrir square and their supporters, who can now show that they are not causing any chaos.

Where the situation will go from here is unclear to say the least. What is clear is that the system has withstood the immediate challenge of the revolution through a mixture of concessions and intimidation, and is now trying to sit it out. Whether it will be successful, or whether there will be enough continued pressure for real democratic change remains to be seen. But even in the worst case of a consolidation of the old system, my friends all say, Egypt has changed forever, and its people can never again be governed the way they were governed just weeks ago.

This morning I took a taxi with my European friend and left downtown Cairo for the other side of the Nile, going to see different friends of ours. In Imbaba, I met an Egyptian-American couple who told that Mubarak's speech on Tuesday night had successfully impressed many of the people in their area and that they were quite trustful that everything will be all right and the government will do what they promised. The Egyptian husband: "The strangest thing that those most oppressed and deprived by Mubarak are those most willing to listen to him." He himself is one of the people who headed to Tahrir to support the demonstrators immediately as they heard of the attack against them. He is constantly shifting between frustration and hope, depending on the kind of news he is receiving.

From Imbaba I continued to my friend in Giza where I could finally put on a fresh set of clothes. It was a tense journey, knowing that the state media has spread stories about foreign agents inciting and paying the people in Tahrir Square, and there being several cases of foreigners being arrested and deported, and foreign journalists being attacked. I did not actually face any hostility, not even stupid questions. But I was still infected by the fear of Wednesday and Thursday nights when we were sitting in the apartment in downtown, listening to gunshots, fights, and shouts, and at least once there were people searching for foreigners trying to enter our street (but the street was guarded by good and trustworthy inhabitants who left nobody in). It will take a little while for that fear to pass. But a strange thing did happen as my Egyptian friend and I walked over Giza Square today. A police officer in uniform stopped us and told that two or three men in civil had just been asking about us and wanting to follow us. The officer asked whether we need

help and protection. We thanked and said that everything is fine and no help needed. I have no explanation to offer, but thank you, officer. I have no intention to be deported from Egypt - I arrived here out of my free will, and tomorrow I will be departing out of my free will.

Egyptians continue to be divided in different camps around the events, but there is much less debate on the streets than there was a couple of days earlier. One camp firmly supports the president, be it out of personal interest, out of belief in strong leaders, or out of fear of chaos. Another camp is critical of the president and the system but optimistic and ready to accept the concessions the government offered. Which way this camp turns in the next days and weeks will be decisive. And one camp, the revolutionary camp, either supports the demonstrators on Tahrir Square, or is standing there right now. A friend of mine from the countryside told me on the phone that he greatly regrets that he hasn't been in Cairo in the last days, because "Egypt's noblest people are now on Tahrir square."

There is an interesting psychological twist to this split. Yesterday the vice president Omar Suleyman declared that "Mubarak is out father." This is a recourse to a social ideology of patriarchal rule where the father is to be respected even in disagreement. This is a shrewd strategy that employs some deeply rooted sentiments among the people, but the sentiments of many Egyptians have changed in a strikingly Oedipal manner. M. says that this revolution is really a Freudian father murder par excellence. By symbolically killing the authoritarian father of the nation, people are gaining their independence as full persons.

On my way to Giza visited I visited the editorial office of one of Egypt's main independent newspapers, whose voice has been very important in the past week and half. The offices were busy as newspaper offices are in preparation of the next day's issue, and the journalists strongly in favour of the revolution. I spoke with some of them, asking them for their predictions (knowing that my own predictions have proven notoriously false). Like most people I have spoken with today, they expressed a mixture of subdued pessimism and proud sense of accomplishment. They said that even in the worst case (which would be Hosni Mubarak and his system staying in power) Egypt has changed for good, because people have learned to speak out, learned that they can make a difference, that they can stand up against police brutality, and that they can take responsibility for their own situation. This alone is a revolution. But it is not enough, and it is under serious threat by government media spreading conspiracy theories and fears about spies, foreign interests and chaos - all well-tested means of rule in the Arab world. The next days and weeks will show how much concrete political changes can be accomplished.

In the period of political transition and pressure that is beginning now, strong and persistent international pressure it is of crucial importance. If you read this and live in a democratic country call your MP, call your government, call your president, and tell them that the slightest degree of

support to Mubarak's regime is the same as supporting crimes against humanity. Only a democratic government elected by the people of Egypt can be an acceptable partner to the world community.

Sunday, 6 February 2011: “Now, it's gonna be a long one” - some first conclusions from the Egyptian revolution

Today is my scheduled day of departure from Egypt. As I sit on Cairo airport waiting for my flight to Frankfurt, it is the first time on this trip that I regret anything - I regret that I am leaving today and not staying. I have told to every Egyptian I have met today that I am not escaping, just going for my work at the university and returning soon. But perhaps it has been more to convince myself than them. My European friend who like me came here last Monday is staying for another two weeks. My American friend in Imbaba tells that for months, she has been homesick to go to America and see her parents and family again. But now when the US government would even give her a free flight, she says that she cannot go. This is her home, and she is too attached to the people, and especially to her husband. Two days ago, he was arrested on his way back from Tahrir square, held captive for four hours, interrogated, and tortured with electroshocks. He is now more determined than ever. How could she leave him behind? But today is my scheduled departure, and I only intended to come for a week and then return to do what I can to give a balanced idea of the situation in Egypt in the public debates in Germany and Finland. Tomorrow I will give a phone interview to Deutschlandradio (a German news radio), and on Tuesday I will give a talk in Helsinki in Finland. Right now, I feel that maintaining high international pressure on the Egyptian government is going to be crucial, and I will do what I can.

There remains little to be reported about the beginning day in Cairo, but maybe I can try to draw some first conclusion from this week.

The morning in Cairo today was marked by a return to normality everywhere except on Tahrir Square itself, where the demonstrations continue. Now that the streets are full with people again, the fear I felt in the past days on the streets is gone, too. If I stayed, today would be the day when I would again walk through the streets of Cairo, talk with people and feel the atmosphere.

From what I know from this morning's short excursion in Giza and Dokki, the people remain split, but also ready to change their mind. As my Egyptian friend and I took a taxi to Dokki, the taxi driver was out on the street for the first time since 24 January, and had fully believed what the state television had told him. But as my friend, a journalist, told him what was really going

on, the driver amazingly quickly shifted his opinion again, and remembered the old hatred against the oppressive system, the corruption, and the inflation that brought people to the streets last week. A big part of the people here seem impressively willing to change their mind, and if many of those who were out on the streets on 28 January - and also of those who stayed home - have changed their mind in favour of normality in the past days, they do expect things to get better now, and if they don't, they are likely to change their minds again. This is the impression I also got from the taxi driver who took me to the airport from Dokki. He, too, had not left his house for eleven days, not out of fear for himself, but because he felt that he must stay at home to protect his family. He was very sceptical of what Egyptian television was telling, but he did expect things to get better now. What will he and others like him do if things don't get better?

As I came to Egypt a week ago I expected that the revolution would follow one of the two courses that were marked by the events of 1989: either a successful transition to democracy by overthrowing of the old regime as happened in eastern Europe, or shooting everybody dead as happened in China. Again, my prediction was wrong (although actually the government did try the Chinese option twice, only unsuccessfully), and now something more complicated is going on.

This is really the question now: Will things get better or not? In other words: Was the revolution a success or a failure? And on what should its success be measured? If it is to be measured on the high spirits and sense of dignity of those who stood firm against the system, it was a success. If it is to be measured by the emotional switch of those who after the Friday of Anger submitted again to the mixture of fear and admiration of the president's sweet words, it was a failure. If the immense local and international pressure on the Egyptian government will effect sustainable political change, it will be a success. But it will certainly not be an easy success, and very much continuous pressure is needed, as a friend of mine put it in words this morning: "Now, it's gonna be a long one."

In Dokki I visited a European-Latin American couple who are determined to stay in Egypt. He was on Tahrir Square on Wednesday night when the thugs attacked the demonstrators, and he spent all night carrying wounded people to the makeshift field hospital. He says: "What really worries me is the possibility that Mubarak goes and is replaced by Omar Suleyman who then sticks to power with American approval. He is the worst of them all." Just in case, he is trying to get his Latin American girlfriend a visa for Schengen area, because if Omar Suleyman's campaign against alleged "foreign elements" and "particular agendas" continues, the day may come when they are forced to leave after all.

A few words about the foreigners participating in the revolution need to be said. Like the Spanish civil war once, so also the Egyptian revolution has moved many foreigners, mostly those living in Egypt since long, to participate in the struggle for democracy. This has been an ambiguous

struggle in certain ways, because the state television has exploited the presence of foreigners on Tahrir Square in order to spread quite insane conspiracy theories about foreign agendas behind the democracy movement. The alliance against Egypt, the state television wants to make people believe, is made up of agents of Israel, Hamas, and Iran. That's about the most insane conspiracy theory I have heard of for a long time. But unfortunately, conspiracy theories do not need to be sane to be convincing. But to step back to the ground of reality, if this revolution has taught me one thing is that the people of Egypt do not need to look up to Europe or America to imagine a better future. They have shown themselves capable of imagining a better future of their own making (with some important help from Tunisia). Compared to our governments with their lip service to democracy and appeasement of dictators, Egyptians have given the world an example in freedom and courage which we all should look up to as an example. This sense of admiration and respect is what has drawn so many foreigners to Tahrir Square in the past days, including myself.

As an anthropologist who has long worked on festive culture, I noticed a strikingly festive aspect to the revolutionary space of Tahrir Square. It is not just a protest against an oppressive regime and a demand for freedom. In itself, it is freedom. It is a real, actual, lived moment of the freedom and dignity that the pro-democracy movement demands. As such, it is an ambiguous moment, because its stark sense of unity (there is a consensus of having absolutely no party slogans on the square) and power is bound to be transient, for even in the most successful scenario it will be followed by a long period of political transition, tactics, negotiations, party politics - all kinds of business that will not be anything like that moment of standing together and finally daring to say "no!". But thanks to its utopian nature, it is also indestructible. Once it has been realised, it cannot be wiped out of people's minds again. It will be an experience that, with different colourings and from different perspectives, will mark an entire generation.

In a different sense, however, the relationship of transience and persistence is a critical one. A revolution is not a quick business; it requires persistence. Some have that persistence, and millions have continued demonstrating (remember that in Alexandria and all major provincial cities there are ongoing in demonstrations as well). Others, however, had the anger and energy to go out to the streets on the Friday of Anger on 28 January to say loudly "No!", but not the persistence to withstand the lure of the president's speech on Tuesday 1 February when Mubarak showed himself as a mortal human, an old soldier determined to die and be buried in his country. A journalist noted to me that this was the first time Mubarak has ever mentioned his own mortality - the very promise that he will die one day seems to have softened many people.

Speaking of generations, this revolution has been called a youth revolution by all sides, be it by the demonstrators themselves, the state media, or international media. Doing so has different connotations. It can mean highlighting the progressive nature of the movement, but it can also mean

depicting the movement as immature. In either case, in my experience the pro-democracy movement is not really a youth movement. People of all ages support the revolution, just like there are people of all ages who oppose it or are of two minds about it. If most of the people out in the demonstrations are young, it is because most Egyptians are young.

Thinking about the way Egyptians are split about their revolution, it is interesting to see how often Egyptians offer me explicitly psychological explanations. The most simple one, regarding the switch of many of those who went out on the streets on the Friday of Anger (28 Jan) but were happy to support the president after his speech after the March of Millions (1 Feb), is that Egyptians are very emotional and prone to react emotionally, and in unpredictable ways. (But I think that this theory is too simple and falls short of explaining why people react to some emotional messages and not to others.) One of the more subtle theories crystallise around the theme of Freud's Oedipal father murder about which I wrote yesterday. Another is the Stockholm Syndrom that some have mentioned as an explanation why those who turn to support are favour of the system are often those most brutally oppressed by the same system. The Stockholm Syndrome, referring to a famous bank robbery with hostages in Stockholm, is the reaction of hostages who turn to support their abductors at whose mercy they are. There is something to it.

As I finish writing this, my plane is leaving for Frankfurt and I will be out of Egypt for a while. After these notes, I will upload also some notes from early last week which I couldn't upload then due to lack of Internet in Egypt. Those are notes from the March of Millions on Tuesday 1 February. But unlike I was thinking at that moment, it was not the biggest demonstration in the history of Egypt. The biggest one was the Friday of Anger on 28 January when people in every street of every city went out to shout "Down with the system!" Due to the almost total media blockade by the Egyptian government, there is still much too little footage from that day. What I have seen so far, shows amazing crowds even in districts far from the city centre, but they also show very systematic violence by the police force, which shot to kill that day. Many were killed, and many more are still missing. I will try to collect image and film material from that day, and if you can send me any, your help is appreciated.

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