

Historical evolution or violent revolution: choose

Joan Chittister | Nov. 23, 2011 From Where I Stand



By the time we got to downtown Cairo on Nov. 18, Tahrir Square was

already an undulating school of people. The crowds swayed back and forth across the roads, stepping over people still wrapped in blankets sleeping on the cement. Like any Fourth of July program in our own parks, a group was banging together the skeleton of a speaker's platform and small groups were already beginning to unwrap the sandwiches they'd brought with them for the day.

This was post-revolution -- maybe better to say *mid-revolution* -- time in Egypt.

The new military government that took over with the fall of Hosnei Mubarak is preparing for an upcoming civilian election. A new Constitution has been proposed. But this crowd is taking nothing for granted. They are here by the thousands again to send their own message to the new rulers: We are watching you. And we don't want the Constitution you have written.

The visit to Tahrir Square on Nov. 19 was the end of a five-day dialogue on Universal Human Rights hosted by GPIW, The Global Peace Initiative of Women, which was inclusive of men as well as women civil rights activists, sociologists, anthropologists, religious figures and young leaders. For days, we had heard about Jan. 25, the great day of revolution 10 months ago. Today we would have an opportunity to judge its character and tone.

At this point in the revolution -- all my own experience and instincts told me that it was far too early to declare the deed done -- there was no blood being shed. There was not a policeman or soldier in sight, in fact. These people were organized, self-disciplined and totally nonviolent. They were simply there -- silent witnesses to the hopes of the whole country for peace and justice, equality and freedom. There was a kind of circus atmosphere about it all, in fact. People waved flags. Children danced in the streets. Artists painted the faces of adults as well as children in patriotic colors. Families strolled through the crowd explaining to their children what it was to be alive at this moment in history, what new kind of pride, what new kind of hope, what new kind of international model came with being an Egyptian now.

In the conversations in the meeting room, however, we had seen the other layers of emotion that come with dissent, as well: relief that the shooting was over; fear that what had been won had, in its own way, divided as many families as it had bonded; the sweet taste of the freedom to speak without recrimination, which they had

been waiting for years.

Some were still getting over the guilt of not having been in the square by continuing to help the wounded that were. Some carried the grief that came from family relationships that lay strained or broken by the political differences that had emerged so clearly during the struggle. Many, certain that the social changes sought had yet to be achieved, feared the loss of the revolutionary energy over time. Everyone carried one scar or another. All of them were committed to the revolution. All of them hoped beyond hope.

It was impossible to look at them and not wonder, after 10 months of meager response from the new military government, now what?

The men in the group tended to talk about structures and philosophies of government. The women talked about what was happening to families and to their own sense of self as a result of it all. It was in the women's lives that the tensions showed most clearly.

Half the women in the meeting room were veiled, some more completely than others. But for all of them, the place of women in society was an issue.

They talked freely about the effects of controlling women's behaviors through the types and effects of the clothes worn by Muslim women, for instance. Or about the value of a woman's access to cars or work or travel or education. They worried aloud about the consequences to their own lives if women were to take on "Western values." They wondered what would become of family life as a result. In fact, they mused, what would that do to the future of the very country itself?

It was a free and open discussion, without rancor, without fear. They weren't debating; they were examining the boundaries of the future. They weren't trying to sell anyone anything. They sat there in jeans and hijabs and face veils and did not argue with one another or deride any position on the scale. They simply listened to one another, something they had not been able to do freely and openly before the revolution for fear of recrimination or worse. They were so sure that new life had finally come to Egypt.

And they talked a lot "about getting in touch with the self."

Then one young woman took the discussion to a higher level than a debate about the rightness or wrongness of any particular practice.

She took the microphone and sought for words.

"The discussion about the role and place of women is not about any of those things," she said simply. "It's about choice. It's about having the right to choose to do those things or not."

The entire group understood. It was freedom they wanted. Choice, the right to talk about anything with anyone anywhere without fear of being turned in to the system, being punished by overseers (either political or religious), being infantilized by families and husbands.

While others talked about texting and Twitter as an instrument of revolution, a creator of the mind of the masses, one older woman even talked about the effect of the Internet during the revolution on the emergence of women from invisibility to self-initiating adults.

The Internet, she said, "had a great deal to do with informing and empowering women during the revolution. It served as an outlet, as an eye-opener. Women could reach out beyond their homes and learn from other women. They could discuss things together in private. They could learn for themselves what was going on.

"Now there is a need, a demand, from women," she went on, "to go on being in touch with the rest of the citizens of the world.

"We need our freedom. The use of the Internet in the revolution unfolded within us the need to feel that we are human citizens. This part of the project is worth everything. It helps to create human beings of our women ? [to shape] how they relate to others and how they relate to themselves."

From where I stand, it all sounded like the chorus of a song the world was singing after WWI. However simple the words, the message was clear: "How you gonna keep them down on the farm after they've seen Paree?"

I left Egypt remembering the county fair quality in Tahrir Square the day before. This surely was a new national beginning.

And yet by the time I landed in New York that night, the party had ended. The police, I learned here -- despite the fact that neither of the two English-language Egyptian newspapers I read in the Cairo airport that morning so much as hinted that there had been problems in the square -- had descended on peaceful people in riot gear to stop their discussions, to disperse the celebration, to end their hope. Many dead, more than 700 injured, our news agencies reported.

From where I stand, it seems that every day since the government released its violence once more, the crowds of dissenters have gotten bigger, their resolve more clear, their commitment to freedom stronger than ever.

So is it over yet? Not at all. In fact, it may just be beginning.

Dictators, authoritarians, hierarchs and governments of all ilk, beware.

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