Let’s Talk About Love... of the Chair

Mai Taha

February 11, 2010 – Mohamed Anwar Al Sadat had previously presumed a paternal role in Egyptian social and political life. Sadat positioned himself as the father of the Egyptian national family who ‘gently’ disciplines. Yesterday, Mubarak assumed the same role addressing his Egyptian “sons and daughters” as a concerned, but “proud” father. After 15 days of the massacre of the young activists, he gave his condolences to their families, claiming that he “suffered plenty for them”. This suffering brought about a dated speech that could have maybe passed on the 28th of January. However, yesterday, after an unprecedented upsurge in the protests in Tahrir Square in the heart of Cairo, this speech is a joke. The comic tragedy of this speech is the essence of this love that has been symptomatic of Egyptian politics. I am not talking about a father’s love to his children; I am not talking about a revolutionary leader’s love to the people; I am talking about the infamous love of the chair. After thirty years of theft, Mubarak’s net worth is estimated to be $70-billion, while 44% of the Egyptian population live under or close to $2 a day. At the age of 82, Mubarak is still in love, in the longest love affair of post-colonial Egypt.

After yesterday’s excitement that swept throughout the virtual world about Mubarak’s resignation, his speech turned out to be merely a reproduction of the current regime by instituting Omar Sulaiman as the de facto ruler, whilst promising his intention to refrain from participating in the presidential race in September of this year. He also promised the amendment of six articles of the constitution (articles 76, 77, 88, 93, 189, and the annulment of article 179) as recommended by the constitutional committee. After his speech, protestors across Egypt marched to the Presidential Palace and the Television and Radio building in an effort to continue the struggle against the regime. Today, after thirty years of oppression, the Vice President, Omar Suliman announced Mubarak’s resignation. Ululations and street performers crowded the ecstatic Egyptian streets.

Evidently, today marks a historical moment in Egypt and the Arab world at large. The next step is to redirect focus on the army, specifically after Suliman announced that the military is taking over power until September. The danger is that some factions of the protestors are supporting the army and chanting ‘the people and the army one hand’. The tone has been shifted slightly by some contingents in the revolution. One commentator compared today’s revolution to the 1952 revolution that ended colonial tutelage and monarchical rule in Egypt. He argued that unlike in
1952, today was a people’s revolution, which was later supported by the army. This sentiment toward the army had been impelled by the police disappearance from the Egyptian street during the first few days of looting, orchestrated predominantly by police mobs in civilian clothes. The fear now is that in the midst of all this well-deserved excitement, we slide into the cooling reformist agendas. This has certainly been emblematic of the old guard’s general policy. Reform has been the banner of oppression throughout Mubarak’s tenure, most significantly through the National Democratic Party and its slogan that was led by Gamal Mubarak, *Fikr Jadeed* or New Thought and by the technocratic government that was headed by Ahmed Nazif, which included the main elements that sustained Egypt’s unrelenting commitment to neoliberal economic policies.

Inflicting reform into radicalism can perhaps be the biggest threat to the Egyptian awakening. Some opposition members have sometimes drifted into such reformist agendas, however the situation now seems to be calling for radical change. The problem pointed out by several commentators – namely, the leaderless paradigm of the current movement – is getting increasingly imminent as events progress on the ground. To the disappointment of a number of Western commentators, the Muslim Brotherhood is taking a peripheral role in the current political scene, which leaves little room for speculation about a Muslim fundamentalist state to follow the secular dictatorship. As for Mohamed El Baradie, he was calling yesterday for the army to intervene lest a civil war erupts. The pro-Mubarak contingent has been silenced by the overwhelming rejection of the regime by most classes and factions of Egyptian society. Newspapers are writing up lists of ‘traitors’ or as some call them the ‘shit lists’ of people who were shunned as a result of siding with Mubarak. With scepticism about the Muslim Brotherhood, Al Baradie, and the pro-Mubarak elements, among others, what can be the venue of political organizing?

As was pointed out, the revolt in Egypt has been labelled as a ‘facebook revolt’, mainly led by discrete youth movements who do not necessarily have a certain political vision, but were all united toward ousting Mubarak’s dictatorship. Despite the leaderless character of the revolt, a new development might redirect the socio-economic and political space envisioned in a post-Mubarak Egypt. On Tuesday, February 8th, 2011, the Helwan steelworkers announced that “the working class join[ed] the revolution,” and thousands of Egyptian workers went on strikes across the country, in Cairo, Alexandria, Al Mahalla Al Koubra, and Suez. There are 6,000 workers on strike in Suez Canal alone, in addition to steelworkers, and textile workers, among others. According to Bloomberg, eight percent of world trade passes through the Suez Canal, including oil barrels. Throughout the last decade, there has been a wave of workers’ strikes across the country. On April 6th, 2008, there was a general workers’ strike, which later became the basis of the 6th April movement that has been quite visible in Egyptian activist scenes since then. Nevertheless, the strikes never reached the current numbers. In a country where labour unions are essentially just another arm of the state, labour organizing has been a significant challenge. Notwithstanding that challenge, such movements have resorted to different ad hoc tactics to bring about their economic demands for better working conditions and higher wages. Such efforts have been partially successful; as reported by the state-run Al-Ahram newspaper in October 2010, the government has raised the minimum wage to the still insignificant amount of L.E. 400 ($70). Only recently, there has been a move toward creating independent unions. Specifically, in 2008, the Independent General Union of Real Estate Tax Authority Workers was
created and in December 2010, only a month prior to the spark of the current revolt, the General Union for Health Technicians was created. These moves have been described by Joel Benin, a specialist on Egyptian labour, as “revolutionary” because they surpassed the legally permissive rules for union creation. In the backdrop of these developments, the current labour upsurge can be analyzed. Benin, in his latest interview on Democracy Now, has pointed out that the labour strikes in the Suez Canal are unlikely to stop the movement of ships unless the pilots join the strike, something that they had refrained from doing throughout the past decade. However, with the increasing participation of the ‘petty bourgeois’, as was seen yesterday with the white medical bloc and the black lawyers’ bloc in Tahrir Square – all uniting toward the end of Mubarak’s reign – there were hopes that the Suez Canal pilots join the workers in strike, leading to a halt of 8% of world trade with the blink of an eye.

Evidently, the situation is full of uncertainty but I refrain from cynicism. After Ben Ali fleeing for his life from Tunisia and the ignition of the Egyptian revolution that finally ousted Mubarak, gloomy speculations have crowded the political spectrum. Despite a sense of excitement about that “moment”, a moment of celebratory revolution where friends and family camp out on the streets singing and chanting, where the young men understood ideas of solidarity by securing their neighbourhoods through the ‘popular councils’ when the police disappeared from the streets, there have been fears of disillusionment with no practical political action that can lead to fundamental transformation in Egyptian public life. What I hope to see is the seizure of this ‘crack’, this unprecedented ‘moment’, while reclaiming its potentially radical force for organized political action that targets income inequality, corruption, and nepotism, among many other paradigmatic facets of Egyptian social and political environment. Perhaps the labour movement can be a primary step toward providing a genuine, material economic threat to the regime, its neighbours, and the world at large. I refuse to join the voice of ‘realism’ at its worst, but I am also uncertain about ‘what is to be done’ after Mubarak. My intervention is simple: seize the moment and resist the confusion of reform with drastic transformation. I think the key question at these critical times is how can we manipulate the love of reform to the love of non-rhetorical radical change? How can we channel the people’s ecstasy into organized political action that does not succumb to yet another military rule?

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