

Arab Spring becomes winter of discontent

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More than 50,000 worshippers gathered in Tahrir Square in Cairo this weekend to demand that the military step down. Photo: Getty

The retreat was rapid. With tear gas and rubber bullets blasting behind us, the crowd surged from Tahrir Square out across the Nile. A concerted push by security forces had forced out the protesters from the symbolic heart of the Egyptian revolution. Thousands breathlessly pounded across the Qasr El Nile bridge, caught by surprise by the furious nature of the attack.

Everyone was going in one direction, except for one elderly sweet potato vendor. Struggling to push his wide wooden cart, protesters darted either side of him. Undeterred, he plodded slowly in the opposite direction over the iconic river. As I fled past, he carefully placed his cart down. He raised his arm in the air and roared: "Ash-sha'b yurid isqat an-ni'zam'."

Those fleeing around him caught their breaths and took up the now famous chant of the Arab Spring. Meaning the people want to bring down the regime, this declaration of defiance has rung out across the Arab world from the streets of Damascus to the souks of Tunis. The omens are not good for a regime when Cairene sweet potato sellers are willing to stand their ground.

Last Sunday's bloody attempt by Egyptian security forces to retake Tahrir has helped propel the country into what some have called the second phase of its revolution. An estimated 41 protesters have died since then, with nearly 2,000 injured, with fresh clashes breaking out yesterday. Egyptians have watched the events on their TV screens with a combination of anger, disbelief and intense apprehension.

It all began ten days ago, with a 50,000-plus gathering in Tahrir. Supported by political forces ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood to the secular left, it demanded that the military quickly step down from power and submit themselves to civilian rule.

"This is the face of the Egyptian majority," one man in his 30s told me. Holding his child in his arms, he said he did not support the Brotherhood. "But they are part of Egyptian society. If they do well in the elections, that is the will of the people. People here just want the military to leave."

After the majority left the square, the remaining forces of mainly young, non-Islamist revolutionaries were attacked by state forces.

For these young revolutionaries, Tahrir is where everything makes sense. It is the living symbol of their democratic aspirations. It is where the songs of the January revolution are still sung, where they watch their comrades die in what they regard as a heroic struggle against military rule.

They find the stinging tear gas in the air almost reassuring, "because if they continue to fire on us, it means we must be doing something right", one young protester who was checking my passport at a security gate told me.

For you do not answer to the police or army in Tahrir - you answer to the revolutionaries. They check your ID and they look in your bag.

Tahrir under the control of the revolutionary youth is well organised. Under sometimes extreme conditions, makeshift field hospitals look after the injured, and food is prepared and ferried to the frontline fighters who constantly clash with security forces.

For these Egyptians, the experience of Tahrir in early 2011 and again last week has been intoxicating. It has provided a glimpse into a different type of Egypt, one that is youthful, vibrant, egalitarian and radically democratic. It is this Egypt they have fought and died for.

For them, life outside of Tahrir does not match these heady heights. Life in post-Hosni Mubarak Egypt has become increasingly disappointing and threatening for the revolutionary vanguard.

Nine months on and the country is still ruled by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). According to Human Rights Watch, since the revolution almost 12,000 civilians have been brought before military tribunals by the SCAF. The military leadership's extension of the 'emergency law' was condemned by Amnesty International as "the greatest erosion of human rights since the resignation of Hosni Mubarak".

Opposition activists have been jailed, and activists have condemned the failure to prosecute members of the former ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). The trial of Mubarak and his sons is slow and regarded as a sham by some. In early October, there was the horrific massacre of protesting Coptic Christians (and Muslim allies) on the east bank of the Nile.

Compared to the inspiring experience of living resistance in Tahrir, the parliamentary elections, due to begin this week, are increasingly viewed as an irrelevance or farce by many of the revolutionary youth.

However, the SCAF has insisted that the first post-Mubarak elections will begin on schedule. Fresh clashes this weekend came after the army appointed 78-year-old Kamal al-Ganzouri, a premier under Hosni Mubarak, as the new prime minister ahead of the election.

They will take place under an electoral system so complicated that voters will almost require a degree in political science to negotiate it, this in a country where literacy levels are barely above 70 per cent. Spread over three months, with results not due until January and with no official international observation, many are sceptical that the military truly intend to relinquish power. The elected parliament will be charged with drawing up a new constitution, but it is not easy to predict who will sit in that parliament. No doubt many of the seats will be filled by members of the Muslim

Brotherhood - the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), the party formed by the brotherhood, achieved nearly 40 per cent in an opinion poll conducted in early October by the Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies.

But the Brotherhood is not homogeneous, and it has been convulsed by internal splits since the ousting of Mubarak. As polling day approaches, Egyptians have begun to ask more searching questions about the FJP's platform - a simple declaration of 'Islam is the answer' does not suffice for a public hoping for an exit strategy from economic stagnation and for more democratic and civic freedoms.

The decision by the Muslim Brotherhood last week not to support a march to Tahrir after midday prayers signals a growing divergence between it and the revolutionary youth in the square. But it could also speak to a more widespread feeling among Egyptians outside Tahrir, many of whom may want the military to step down, but are uncomfortable with the strategy of the activists in the square. The desire for stability is strong here.

The inability of secular and left-wing forces to organise openly under the old regime means they are playing catch-up. Many on the liberal and socialist left have been on the streets, but have also been involved in the hectic building of an independent trade union movement. There have been waves of strikes across all sectors in recent months, reflecting the economic malaise and the growing anger and sense of fight among the organised working class.

A recent report by consultancy group Geopolicity concluded that post-revolutionary flux had wiped some 4.2 per cent off Egypt's GDP, with public revenues falling by \$75 million. Forty per cent of Egyptians live on less than \$2 a day.

Inflation is growing, particularly in foodstuffs. For instance, tomatoes, hugely important in the diets of Egyptians, have nearly doubled in price in the last year. Unemployment has officially risen to almost 12 per cent (although many observers believe the real figure in excess of this) with young people disproportionately affected.

Instability has hit the vital tourism sector. Officially the authorities say that, in September, visitors were down 25 per cent from 2010, but other sources have quoted higher figures.

In wider Egyptian society, opinion about the future of the country may be in flux, but for the protesters in Tahrir, the battle lines have become clearer. For them, the army leadership is a counter-revolutionary force and part of the problem, rather than a benign facilitator in the much-promised transfer to civilian rule.

They believe there was a revolution in January 2011 in which they did the fighting and filled the ranks of the martyrs. But after Mubarak was ousted in February and the bulk of the protesters left Tahrir, there remained a strange anomaly in their revolution - the revolutionaries never came to power.

Because of that, the Egyptian revolution remains unfinished in the eyes of those still in Tahrir this weekend. It is their conviction that the future of this unfinished revolution will be shaped more on the streets than by an election process in which many have little faith.

David Lynch is the author of A Divided Paradise: An Irishman in the Holy Land

www.davidlynchwriter.com