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Cairo, 24th November 2011

A friend from Vienna sent me a few days ago a beautiful quote by Pablo Neruda, the great Chilean poet. The quote is: **“You can cut all the flowers, but you cannot stop Spring from coming”**

Reading this quote made me think again about the widely used term, “Arab Spring”. I never liked the term; springtime in Arab countries does not always bring nice weather. In Egypt for example, we have horrible sand storms at that time. But what really annoyed me about the term is the temporary nature of it: 3 months! It sounded as if a short season of revolutions can bring freedom and justice to a region that has been deprived of them for centuries!

But the Pablo Neruda quote suggested something else: Spring is a continuous and perpetual state, not a season. This does not mean that what I want in my country and my region is a state of continuous revolution, with the chaos and violence that usually accompanies revolutions. What I want is a state of continuous and perpetual pursuit of freedom and justice; an eternal Spring!

Enough of the rhetoric, you all want to know what is happening in Egypt! I want to start by two general remarks: first, this is my own personal account and summation of the situation, and as such it is subjective and limited. The second remark is that whatever I say about what is happening in Egypt applies to some degree to Syria, Yemen and Bahrain. The situations in Tunisia and Libya differ a little bit.

Since 25 January the Egyptian people have been fighting against an extremely powerful and vicious regime that was established decades before Mubarak took power in 1981. What started as a nationalistic military movement in 1952, transformed slowly and over decades into a dictatorial, corrupt, and extremely oppressive regime. The features are well known: small gangs around individuals that are networked into mafias; some of them have family ties but this does not mean that they cannot turn against each other at any moment, over a major deal for example. The Mubarak family was pivotal but was not the essence of the regime. The military elite constituted the essence of the regime. These are all men who are over 50 years of age, with the leaders much older than that, mostly trained in the US, well travelled and have strong international connections and

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allies, and all have great personal wealth made during the past 50 years. Around this core, there are circles of partners, beneficiaries, aspiring partners, employees, soldiers, legislators, politicians, journalists, etc. The bulk of this block could be around 100,000 people. They have access to huge financial resources and to the weapons and ammunitions of the army and the police.

This is my brief account of the enemy, but what about the people? Who is fighting against them? Is it one political power or many? This is a much more difficult question to answer. The fight started in January with leaders who almost all belong to the secular upper middle classes: young university graduates, academics, professionals, human rights activists. After a few days, large groups of Islamists joined them. Islamists are various factions and groups, the largest being the Moslem Brotherhood which is much less ideological than the other ones, is very pragmatic, and well organized. The other factions are all small but steadily growing in numbers. Differences between these groups are sometimes difficult to figure out. They are known as Salafis, or Salafists, which means that they strictly follow the example of very early Moslems who lived 1400 years ago. It must be noted here that Islamists (Moslem Brotherhood and others) were probably the people who suffered most before Arab revolutions. They were systemically imprisoned and tortured and even killed by oppressive regimes in the region. It is also worth noting that ideologically, Islamic thought is inherently against revolution as a concept; obedience of the ruler is a virtue, and if the ruler is unjust, then the goal should be to put in place a just ruler who should be obeyed.

After Mubarak was removed, by his military elite in response to the demands of the revolution, the Islamists appeared as a major organized political power. In February and March, it was clear that the Military are trying to detach this power from the rest of the people who took part in the revolution. Being pragmatic, and not interested in a comprehensive revolution, the Islamists fell easily into the trap. What followed during the months March to September was a bizarre and meaningless cat fight between the Islamists and the secular powers; that was won by the military.

Meanwhile, there was something else going on, possibly a much more important development, a growing wave of small protests and strikes asking for social justice. The poorer classes that were not active in the January revolution started to appear as a force. There were successful attempts at organizing these protestors into "independent unions" and other structures. This power is still not fully tested as a political player, but is certainly what is feared most by the military because of the scale it can reach. It is common knowledge that 40% of the 85 million Egyptians live under the poverty line.

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Religious fights between Moslems and Christians are not something new in Egypt. Accounts of bloody clashes appear in 19th century history books. In more recent times, during Sadat's rule, Egypt saw a wave of very violent clashes between Moslems and Christians. These clashes always leave Christians, the weaker party, with more victims. Regrettably, intolerance is deeply embedded in our social values. This social disease was often used by the regime as a weapon; whenever they got under fire for forging elections or raising prices, they would stage or support a violent clash between Moslems and Christians. The State itself (I use this term rather liberally as I don't believe we have a "state" in the real sense of the term) exercises religious discrimination against Christians at a large scale. Injustice towards Christians is widely accepted, and even encouraged by many political and social practices.

Christians being such an easy target suffered one of the most horrible crimes committed by the military since January. On 9 October 2011, twenty seven Christians, mostly young men who were peacefully protesting, were savagely and deliberately killed by the army around the Egyptian state television building, known as Maspero.

This horrible crime changed the way many Egyptians thought about the army. Until then, many thought that the army took the side of the revolution, since it did not open fire on protestors in January and February. The videos showing military armed cars deliberately crushing young people caused outrage and marred the image the army was working very hard to create via State media and press.

While the Islamists and the elite secular political powers were, and still are, busy campaigning to make sure they win seats in the forthcoming parliamentary elections, that are so badly designed and organized that it is doubtful that the new parliament will reflect the will of the Egyptian people, the lower middle classes and the poor people's level of anger and dissatisfaction was rising. The economic situation caused them to be even more disadvantaged than before, and the security situation is worse than ever. The anger was building up towards an explosion but needed a trigger.

On Friday 18 November, there was a very large protest in Tahrir called for by Islamists against a constitutional principles document the army was trying to impose. The document gave the army huge political and economic benefits, in addition to including a description of the State as a "civil" one, a term that means to most people a non-religious state. After the demonstration a small group of people, around 200, who were injured in January and February decided to stay in Tahrir until their demands for medical treatment and compensations are met. The police attacked them severely. This was

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the needed trigger. Since then there are massive protests in Tahrir and 10 other cities in Egypt demanding the removal of the military council and handing power to a civilian presidential council. The protest are being met by the police, and on occasions by the army, by rubber bullets, tear gas bombs and even live bullets as testified by the minister of health. The death toll so far (on 24 November) is estimated at 48 people; I say estimated as the police try to hide bodies and destroy evidence of killings.

The protests are getting bigger as the police and army attacks get more violent. Where is this all going, no one knows right now. Some people are hoping that the military council will step down and hand power to a civilian body. I personally doubt this very much and I think that we still have a long way to go. I don't think this regime, or the regimes in Syria, Yemen and Bahrain, will surrender before they use all the weapons they have. They are using only a small part of the weapons in Egypt right now and will use more. But also they are using the local and international media and their international allies.

When I hear international reporters end their reports from Tahrir by saying things like: "Egypt is drowning in waves of chaos and violence", or "The future of Egypt is unknown", I feel a little sick. It sounds as if they prefer to have our country ruled by "known" dictators, than to let it take the difficult and bumpy road to freedom. I sometimes feel the West wants a quick fix to the problem, a 3-months season of revolutions that ends with democracies in a region that has never known any form of democratic rule before (maybe except for Lebanon). But how long did it take the West to produce its democracy? How many lives were lost? How many wars?

When I say the West, I of course mean Western governments, not my colleagues and friends who are artists, writers and cultural activists. We are all very grateful for the support our colleagues and friends all over the world have been providing. We ask them for more: please put pressure on your governments and on your media and convey one message "do not support dictators and killer, even if they tell you they will protect your interests and stand against Islamist". They are lying, just like they lied before. Your interests will be best protected if we are all free and equal, just like you, even if it takes a long time.

Thank you, Basma El Husseiny



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