



Laughter in the Dark: Egypt to the Tune of Change

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Columbia Global Reports, 2023, 111 pgs. R338

An extract

The modern history of Egypt is told, by insiders and outsiders alike, largely through the narrative of authoritarian leaders and their so-called “iron-fisted” rule. Gamal Abdel Nasser (1956–1970) was well known for his method of having people disappeared – “behind the sun” is the Arabic refrain¹ – if they disagreed with his socialist, nationalist policies, as well as for his persecution of Egypt’s Jews.² And for thirty years, under the rule of the late Hosni Mubarak (1981–2011), citizens did not dare speak of politics, for fear of the deep state, with its troops of secret police and informants,³ notorious for their ruthless methods of kidnapping and torture.

This was the atmosphere I grew up in; this was what my parents before me had been raised to understand: politics could put you in jail, if not simply get you vanished away. I learned this myself early on, in the way my parents, their friends, and our relatives distinguished what could or couldn’t be said. Rumors were rife about what happened to a classmate’s father. We heard snippets of things, but knew we could never ask outright. This, too, was something we came to understand, without ever having to be explicitly told. If we broached a subject that was out of bounds, we were brought to silence, not vocally, but by stern eye contact from an elder. As children, we quickly learned these cues. There were subjects that were never to be addressed.

It was as easy, back then, to control what we spoke of as it was to control what we consumed. There were only two government-operated television channels broadcasting some twelve hours a day, and a third channel that stopped at 1:00 p.m. You were guaranteed to be watching a black-and-white Egyptian film (probably a tragicomic one) twice a day, several newscasts, and an educational program for children, generally about what was morally right and wrong – “never lie to your parents.” (The president’s wife was referred to on these programs as “Mama” Suzanne.) The greatest indulgence would be a foreign film once every few days (usually a western), and a cartoon (Tom and Jerry). This was the universe we were exposed to: a carefully curated worldview courtesy of the Egyptian government’s broadcasting arm,⁴ a mouthpiece for the Mubarak regime.

Things didn’t change much even as Egypt became more exposed in the early 2000s, with the arrival of the internet and eventual widespread access to mobile phones. The government had so successfully indoctrinated citizens – partially through patronage, partially through fear – that few dared to speak out, even if asked to. This undertone

of the unspeakable had become so deeply entrenched in the cultural and social fabric of Egypt, that mine was a generation that seemed to simply inherit the silence that our parents had mastered. It was a “know-how,” in a sense, that extended fluidly from childhood into early adulthood. As a journalist working in the country from the age of eighteen, I was quick to learn the “red lines,” as we referred to them, the clear parameters of what could or could not be broached. Red lines were considered, tiptoed toward, and never crossed.

The Egyptian Revolution of 2011⁵ changed this atmosphere in fundamental ways, even as its recent ten-year anniversary was marked by a political climate of censorship and human rights abuses. Although official figures are hard to come by, it was estimated by human rights groups that up to 60,000 political dissidents were being held in jail as of late 2022,⁶ many for belonging to the wrong political party, or for expressing personal views not aligned with the state. As I write this, late in 2022, I believe it is fair to say that Egypt is at its most oppressive point in its modern history. Few would contest that. Government and army officials have often been quoted saying that the long-standing “emergency rule” measures⁷ have been necessary, to avoid the chaos of Syria, or the political mayhem experienced under the Muslim Brotherhood’s rule. The president, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, has explicitly stated on television that he will never allow what occurred in 2011 to happen again.⁸ People I know are in prison simply for voicing opinions or personal experiences. One friend, Alaa Abdel Fattah, a blogger, computer programmer, and activist,⁹ was arrested in 2019 for a Facebook post, and has been in prison ever since, on fabricated charges of spreading false news that undermined national security. Freedom of speech is a calculated risk you choose to take.

Yet despite this repressive atmosphere and the constant threat of censorship and silencing, what happened in the eighteen months between January 2011 and July 2013 – the street protests that led to the downfall of Mubarak and his clan, and the subsequent ones in 2013 that led to the ouster of Mohamed Morsi, who had become the first freely elected post-revolution president – can perhaps never entirely be reversed. What I am referring to specifically is the breaking of a fear barrier of personal and political expression.

It was a surprise to everyone that the Egyptian Revolution unfurled with the speed and impact that it did, even as there were indications throughout 2010 that something in the political landscape and imagination was shifting – the result of a confluence of predicaments and events. In the span of six months, between the summer and winter of 2010, inflation was at a record high, power cuts had become daily occurrences, and prices of basic commodities skyrocketed. That November, the parliamentary elections were rife with unprecedented thuggery and bullying at the hands of the state, which was angling for Mubarak’s son, Gamal (aka Jimmy), to take the helm of the ruling National Democratic Party. He was widely expected to take over from his father, in a succession plan that was being likened to monarchy. Citizen grievances were high. People felt pressured by the inconveniences and economic difficulties of managing the very basic needs of their everyday lives.

On December 31, just weeks before the revolution erupted, a suicide bomber exploded himself outside a church in Alexandria just as worshippers were leaving New Year's Mass, killing twenty-one people. The government was accused by Muslims and Christians alike of neglecting Egypt's minority Coptic community, and a week later, on Coptic Christmas Eve, tens of thousands of Muslims formed human chains around Coptic churches across the country.¹⁰ If suicide bombers intended to blow up the Christians and their churches, they would have to blow up the Muslims first.

Adding to the backdrop of all this were protests raging in nearby Tunisia, which Egyptians watched closely via satellite television. The atmosphere in my home city of Cairo, and across many of the country's twenty-seven other governorates, was tense. You could feel it in the air. On New Year's Day 2011, for the online Egyptian news site, *Ahram Online*, I wrote:

The cumulative and unprecedented peak of discontent – of the elections, the persecution, and the longstanding economic troubles that plague the majority of the nation's 80 million population – may very well serve to unite disparate groups of activists and politicians, bringing them together in a larger, more forceful movement for change. And the example of Tunisia, and the courage its youth have displayed in risking their lives, may very well be the impetus Egypt's own youth and activists need to take their activities to a new level of vitality.¹¹

Less than three weeks later, Egyptians took to the streets of the capital in the tens of thousands, and in cities and towns across the country. I was part of the protest movement from early that morning, when there were just several hundred of us in total marching in different groups through the city's streets. But by late that afternoon, numbers had swelled, and approximately 30,000 protesters had gathered in Tahrir (Liberation) Square¹² in central Cairo, in a standoff with riot police that went on for hours. By the time I had left the Square, well after midnight, the crowds were still there, with no signs of leaving – neither the putrid tear gas that filled the air, nor the rubber bullets that were being fired at protesters by the police, had effect. The protesters were steadfast. Three days later, more than a million people joined in a march through Cairo and toward Tahrir Square. From that point on, the numbers simply multiplied by day. Egyptians demonstrated in the streets of the capital, and through cities, towns, and villages across the country, often camping out in public squares in makeshift tents and temporary constructions. They marched with banners calling for reforms and basic rights; they used pots and pans for percussion and drums, and they chanted, mantras such as the most popular refrain, "bread, freedom, social justice."¹³ And they broke into song.

Grievances left unspoken for decades had been unleashed, and for eighteen days, Egypt was at a complete standstill. Protests had overrun the country, the internet had been cut off by the government, businesses were shut down, and a curfew was in place from 6:00 p.m. until 7:00 a.m. The army rolled into central Cairo in tanks and trucks,

lining main streets and central squares in the name of “protecting the great people” of Egypt. For the most part, however, the officers and soldiers simply stood by, watching. With millions of Egyptians spending nights in the streets, political power – for the first time in decades – lay there. Civilians had taken over patrolling their cities. They were setting the rules of the streets, as well as the political agenda.

In the months that followed, the popular social, political, and economic expression that had found an outlet in the streets in the form of banners and chants extended into the mainstream narrative through articles, web-sites, magazines, and books. Political parties were formed in unprecedented numbers. Manifestos seemed to be everywhere, posted on lamp-poles, handed out in public squares, and circulated online. Activists founded NGOs and human rights organizations, Critiques of the government, the president, the ministers, and even the long-sacred army became commonplace. The public protest against the government became the go-to means of complaint. Its form became the marching body, and its message in the chants and songs that accompanied it.¹⁴

Those of us who partook in the “revolution” or “uprising” never expected the sense of agency to end. But it disintegrated when the army formally came to power with the ouster of Morsi in the summer of 2013, and the contrived election the following spring of then-defense minister and army general Abdel Fattah El-Sisi. Muslim Brotherhood members were rounded up by the hundreds and thrown in prison. Politically active citizens were arrested and put through swift trials in military court, without lawyers, bypassing due process, and most of them were thrown in jail. Death sentences became commonplace. A judge sentenced 683 alleged Muslim Brotherhood members to death in a single trial.¹⁵ Gatherings of ten people or more were outlawed. Police began to stop young people in the streets and search their phones. This had never happened before.

Under Mubarak, the political red lines had been clear – black and white, so to speak. Anything critical of the president, his sons, and a small circle of his advisors and confidants – which included businessmen as well as members of parliament and the state was off limits. One could not address bilateral agreements with Israel, including major trade deals such as the Egypt-Israel gas-supply pipeline. Beyond that, everything was fair game. Under Sisi, those lines morphed, expanding beyond political discourse to include anything from lurid lyrics in a song, to social media posts that are deemed “morally offensive.” As I write this, at least six young women are in jail for being in videos said to be in violation of “family principles and values upheld by Egyptian society”¹⁶ – one clip involves a divorcée in tight-fitting clothes dancing with her boyfriend. Such arrests are not a matter of state policy per se, but the Stasi-like practice of “citizen patrolling,”¹⁷ of spying, monitoring, and reporting against fellow citizens. This policing system has discouraged anything potentially disruptive to the state, to include content posted by local social media influencers.¹⁸

The content is perhaps less the offense than is the number of viewers who see it; under a law passed in 2018, social media users with more than 5,000 followers are considered “media outlets,”¹⁹ making them subject to prosecution for publishing anything considered “false news” or “incitement” – umbrella terms that can be twisted

to include most all personal expression. In a state that has deemed itself perennially at threat, there are also no clear-cut criterion – the only constant is that parameters are continually shifting. Who is reported, prosecuted, arrested, released – all this is arbitrary.

Within this political climate, it is telling, then, that Egypt's independent music scene, with its Arabic genre of hip-hop, known as *mahraganat*, has been thriving. In the tradition of Snoop Dogg, Tupac, Eminem, and Jay-Z, and borrowing from the history and technical forms of the genre, these Egyptian music artists are reliant on lyrics grounded in deeply personal, political, sexual, and socioeconomic realities – most everything the government would prefer citizens not to speak about, and the kind of material that citizen patrols love to report. The artists rap about their own lives, their neighborhoods, their rivals, their personal, economic, and political battles, as well as their successes, money, women, and dreams. In one song, for example, the duo Oka and Ortega²⁰ rhapsodized about drinking alcohol and taking drugs – both considered blasphemy in Islam, and the drugs, needless to say, punishable with jail:

You're sitting alone, idle-minded
Satan is leading you to the wrong path
He keeps telling you "let's play, dude"
Let's play, dude, why don't you play, dude, let's play, dude, let's
play, dude
You want to be a man of principle
quit the drugs
and say "I'm starting"
Satan comes and keeps telling you
Drink, dude, drink, dude, light it, dude

A growing league of local artists, mostly in their twenties, boast millions of followers online. They have sold-out concerts at licensed venues, but also at street weddings and private parties, even as the state has repeatedly attempted to shut them down. Many of the most popular of these music artists were too young to properly partake in the Egyptian Revolution – most of them were pre-teens or in their early teens – but they came of age at that moment of rupture, when everyone was speaking out. It has, over time, come to define who they are, too – outspoken, uninhibited, independent, *free*.

Unlike my generation, which came of age in the nineties and was raised in constant fear of speech, the rules of the game for these music hipsters don't abide by any social or cultural norms the country has known before. The long-held parameters of what can and can't be said have become obsolete in their hands. They rap about long-taboo issues. They have no hesitations, and political fears seem not to exist for them.

These singers have commanded my attention, even envy at first, precisely for their lack of inhibition – for their fierce assertion of independent, nonconformist identities. They are free in an environment that does everything it can to break individual freedoms. They did not cave in, as my generational peers did. They do not swallow their words.

Egypt's official population is pushing 105 million citizens. It is widely known that the number is larger some analysts estimate by at least 5 to 7 percent. In August 2022, the government announced that the population had grown by 750,000 in the past six months.²¹ Sixty percent of that population, or 65 million people, are under the age of twenty-nine, so it is no surprise that these young musicians have millions of fans at their command. It is those fans, influenced by the music artists they revere, who are the future of the country the ones who will essentially define what Egypt comes to be.

In as much as one can attempt to capture the energy and dynamics of a place as vast and diverse as Egypt, this book is a distillation of an ongoing moment in time, through the prism of a segment of these youth, and with a view to the future. The artists profiled are all illustrative, but they are also select – there are at least one hundred more that make up the scene. This book is not written for the insider, neither of the music scene nor of the country. Many of us who live here know this history and these stories, albeit through divergent political viewpoints and proximities. The book is therefore intended for the millions who had followed the Egyptian Revolution with intrigue, and have since turned their attention elsewhere. The story of Egypt, and of its revolutionary fervor, is not yet over.

New Agenda readers can purchase the book in Kindle format at <https://www.amazon.com/Laughter-Dark-Egypt-Tune-Change-ebook/dp/B0BK4RFFXC/> (US\$10, plus 15% VAT.)

To listen to the music, [playlist²²](#) of artists and songs featured in the book is available on Spotify.

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ENDNOTES

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- 3 For more on the deep state and Mubarak's human rights record, see Amnesty, starting with <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/02/hosni-mubarak-legacy-of-mass-torture/>
- 4 Known as Maspero, this was the symbolic center of media power https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maspero_television_building
- 5 For my account of the uprising, see *The Battle for Egypt, Dispatches from the Revolution*.
- 6 Vivian Yee, "'A Slow Death': Egypt's Political Prisoners Recount Horrific Conditions," *New York Times*, August 8, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/08/world/middleeast/egypts-prisons-conditions.html>
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- 8 "Text of Al-Sisi's Speech During the Activities of the Egypt Economic Conference 10/23/2022," <http://manassa.news/stories/7728>
- 9 For background, Yasmine El Rashidi, "He Was Detained. That Didn't Stop Them From Kidnapping Him," *New York Times*, October 3, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/03/opinion/egypt-Alaa-Abd-El-Fattah-protests.html>
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- 12 For my account of January 25, see Yasmine El Rashidi, "'Hosni Mubarak, the Plane Is Waiting,'" *New York Review*, January 26, 2011, <https://www.nybooks.com/online/2011/01/26/hosni-mubarak-plane-waiting/>
- 13 From PBS, see "Egyptian Protesters Chanting in Tahrir Square," PBS NewsHour, YouTube video, February 4, 2011.
- 14 For more on this, see Karima Khalil's book *Signposts from Tahrir*.
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- 17 Yasmine El Rashidi, "How Egypt Crowdsources Censorship," *New York Times*, December 8, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/08/opinion/sunday/egypt-censorship-crowdsourcing.html>
- 18 Ciao Deng, "Egypt Arrests Social media Influencers in Deepening Crackdown," *Wall Street Journal*, February 11, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/egypt-arrests-social-media-influencers-in-deepening-crackdown-b26835bc>
- 19 "Media Law in Egypt: The New Developments," Youssry Saleh & Partners, March 25, 2018, <https://youssrysaleh.com/Investment-in-Egypt/media-law-in-egypt-the-new-developments/>
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- 22 See <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/1VLx8fQ5lbrwi8FwJzSE> or search "mahraganat" on Spotify.