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Revolutionary Homework

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"On December 23, April 6 activist... alleged that several opposition parties and movements have accepted an unwritten plan for democratic transition by 2011; we are doubtful of this claim" – secret cable from the US Embassy in Cairo to Washington [1]

"Nonviolent action is not just about non-violence, but also about joy and happiness ... [People] saw in Tahrir what Egypt could possibly be in the future and they wanted to be part of this new Egypt" – Wael Adel, Academy for Change [2]

In the popular imagination, mass nonviolent action ("people power") is often portrayed as a largely improvised and unplanned affair. The reality is usually very different. Thus, Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat to a white passenger and the ensuing Montgomery bus boycott are respectively (mis)remembered as the action of an ordinary woman who was simply "too tired to move", and a spontaneous public reaction to her subsequent arrest and prosecution.

In reality, Parks was secretary of the Montgomery chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) and had recently attended the legendary Highlander Folk School - a crucial training center for civil rights and labour activists. Moreover the local Women's Political Council had decided to call a boycott at least nine months before Parks' refusal, and were just waiting for the right person to get arrested. [3]

Hardly noticed

The recent uprising in Egypt – still ongoing, having overthrown the dictator but not yet the underlying regime (see PN 2532) – is another example.

Much media attention has been given over to the role played by social media in the revolution, but considerably less has been devoted to the many years of preparation, training and seemingly fruitless activism that ultimately contributed to its dramatic successes earlier this year.

As Alex Nunns and Nadia Idle write in the introduction to their recent book "Tweets from Tahrir" (see PN 2533): "the very activists who made such good use of Twitter during the uprising ... had been mobilising, forming groups and holding small protests in the face of police brutality since at least the year 2000, but the world hardly noticed". [4]

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Here we briefly examine three important groups in this history: Kefaya ("Enough"); the Academy of Change; and the April 6 Youth Movement. [5]

Enough!

With its origins in the solidarity committees set up during the second Palestinian intifada (begun September 2000) and the movement against the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Kefaya ("Enough") emerged in 2004, galvanized by fears that Egypt's President, Hosni Mubarak, was planning a hereditary transfer of power to his son Gamal. [6]

Inspired by a "Call for Civil Disobedience" written by the respected former judge Tariq al-Bishri, Kefaya held its first action - a silent stand-in on the steps of the High Court in Cairo – in December 2004. As the first demonstration to

call for Mubarak to step down, this was a watershed event.

Another high-profile action, timed to coincide with a referendum on changes to Egypt's constitution, took place on the steps of the Press Syndicate HQ in May 2005. In what became a familiar pattern, the demonstrators were attacked by Mubarak's thugs, and several female activists were sexually molested. [7]

Though it had inspired the creation of a host of new groups Kefaya fell into the doldrums after the September 2005 Presidential election. Though it had managed to break through several important barriers, it had failed to organise the campaign of mass civil disobedience promised by its leaders.

Academy of Change

In November 2005, London-based Egyptian ex-pat Wael Adel travelled from London to Cairo to give a three-day workshop on nonviolent civil disobedience to an audience that included around 30 members of Kefaya. [8]

Inspired by Serbia's October 2000 "Bulldozer Revolution" and the writings of Gene Sharp (see review on p. INSERT PAGE HERE), Wael, his cousin Ahmed, and physician Hisham Morsy, had been using the internet to advocate using nonviolent action to overthrow Mubarak.

Branding themselves the "Academy of Change" (AOC), the trio began publishing books about nonviolent strategy and tactics, including "Nonviolent War the 3rd Choice" (2007) and "Shields to Protect Against Fear" (2008). The latter explained how to use padding and other tools to protect oneself from truncheon blows – knowledge that would prove very useful.

An early victory for these ideas took place in December 2006 when 20,000 workers in Mahalla, a large city in the middle of the Nile Delta, staged a six-day strike over unpaid bonuses. Apparently phased by the nonviolent character of the strike, the authorities granted concessions.

April 6

A second strike in Mahalla was scheduled for 6 April 2008, and in March 2008 Kefaya activist Ahmed Maher and Egyptian social-networking enthusiast Esraa Rashid set up a Facebook page to support it. Within a day over 3,000 people had signed up and the group quickly attracted 70,000 members. [9]

The strike itself was a failure - dissolving into violence in which at least three strikers were killed – as were the Facebook-planned support actions which were poorly attended. However, at least two important things happened as a result.

Firstly, the AOC-trained nonviolence trainer Saad Bahaar widened his work, travelling further afield to help spread the ideas and principles of nonviolent civil disobedience to the industrial areas outside Cairo. [10]

Secondly, the Facebook-mobilised activists persisted, forming the April 6 Youth Movement. Inspired by the Serbian group Otpor, which had played a key role in overthrowing Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, they adopted a clenched-fist logo, and sent several members to Serbia for nonviolence training [11].

Kites, no-shows and persistence

Most importantly they kept organising despite numerous failure and defeats.

In the light of recent events, it is a poignant experience to go back and read the contemporary news reports about this activism: the protest that thousands signed up to on-line – and which the Washington Post send a reporter to cover - but only 15 people (3 men, 12 women) showed up to; the patriotic "kite-flying" action on a beach in Alexandria where the activists were stopped by police before they had even managed to unfurl their kite; the detention, torture and personal costs endured by the activists concerned. [12]

15,000 volunteers

In February 2010 when former International Atomic Energy Association and Nobel Peace Prize winner Mohammed ElBaradei returned to Cairo to campaign for political change, activists created a pro-Baradei Facebook page and turned to the AOC for help in training supporters.

By September 2010 Associated Press was reporting that 15,000 volunteers had received training (Saad Behaar alone trained over 800 people) and that a further 9,000 were either waiting to be trained or had applied to join the campaign. The co-ordinators openly declared their intention "to one day be the heart of a civil disobedience movement that will take on the Mubarak regime". [13]

Rehearsing nonviolence

In the meantime a second Facebook page, set up to protest the police-killing of a young Egyptian man named Khaled Said, attracted hundreds of thousands of followers and became a key conduit for disseminating – and rehearsing – nonviolent strategies.

"Flash mobs" were organised in which small groups dressed in black gathered in particular locations, lining roads and turning their backs on the street for a specified length of time. [14]

25 January

On 17 December 26-year-old Tunisian Bouazizi set himself on fire, sparking the Tunisian uprising, and 11 days later the Khaled Said page called for a nationwide march on 25 January ("National Police Day") demanding the dissolution of the state security agency.

Surpassing organisers' expectations, hundreds - rather than tens - of thousands took to the streets that day, and the rest is history.

Keeping the peace

The predominantly nonviolent character of the demonstrations – in particular the demonstrators' decision to refrain from engaging in lethal force - played a key role in winning public support and preventing the army from openly siding with the regime.

During pivotal confrontations on the four-lane Kasr al-Nile bridge on 28 January – probably the most decisive day of the revolution, on which hundreds were killed - protestors spent hours absorbing beatings by the police before the latter fled, allowing the protestors to burn down the ruling party's HQ. "The strategy was the people who were injured

would go to the back and other people would replace them," Maher later explained. "We just kept rotating." [15]

Activists did use force eg. to defend Tahrir Square from attacks by Mubarak's thugs, but managed to prevent this defensive violence from spiralling out of control. Demonstrators searched those entering the Square for weapons [16], and one Tweeter noted that "When protesters capture thgs who r KILLING them, they protect them from being beaten all the way till they hand them over to the military". [17]

All that preparation had payed off.

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Three lessons

What lessons can Western activists learn from this?

First, that persistence is a necessary – if not a sufficient – condition for success, and you may have to experience many years of bitter failure first in order to succeed. Many in the peace movement will be all-too-familiar with this lesson, but it bears reemphasising.

Second, the importance of training and preparation.

One of the reasons why the UK anti-war movement was unable to escalate its actions to mass civil disobedience following the historic million-strong march on 15 February 2003, was its failure to lay the groundwork for this in advance. The anti-cuts movement should take note.

Everything is possible

Third, and finally, that we can and should think big.

As April 6 co-founder Ahmed Salah put it in a recent interview with the International Centre for Nonviolent Conflict [18]: "It is very important that no matter how hard, or difficult, things get you must always have faith that the impossible is possible. Everything is possible. Who would have believed that the Egyptian police, which is maybe the third largest police force in the world after China and India, with over two and a half million people, would be defeated in a day or two. This is beyond the belief of anyone that this is possible and could happen. It did happen, and look what is happening all over the Middle East with Arabs trying to gain their freedom in the same way. Everyone wants freedom, so once there is hope, once you never give up, you keep fighting, and you'll get there."

PN is encouraging groups around the country to mark this year's Unarmed Forces Day (25 June) by staging public readings from "Tweets from Tahrir: Egypt's revolution as it unfolded, in the words of the people who made it" (OR Books, 2010). See

<http://unarmedforcesday.wordpress.com>. Copies can be purchased from JNV, 29 Gensing Road, St Leonards on Sea, East Sussex TN38 0HE; 07980 748 555; at the special price of £7 incl p&p.

Tweets co-editor Alex Nunns will be running a workshop on the Egyptian uprising at this year's Peace News Summer Camp, and (technology-permitting) Gabriel will attempt to run a workshop based on the International Centre for Nonviolent Conflict's "People Power" computer game

(www.peoplepowergame.com).

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[1] "Egypt protests: secret US document discloses support for protesters", Daily Telegraph web-site, 28 January 2011.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/8289698/Egypt-protests-secret-US-document-discloses-support-for-protesters.html>

[2] "Egyptian revolution fueled by non-violent activists", Reuters, 13 April 2011.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/04/13/us-egypt-revolution-idUSTRE73C18E20110413>

[3] See: "Rosa Louise Parks Biography",

http://www.rosaparks.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=118&Itemid=60; "Rosa Parks at Highlander", <http://www.highlandercenter.org/photo-gallery-rosa-parks.asp>; and "Women's Political Council", http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_womens_political_council/

[4] Tweets, p.22

[5] Other groups also helped sow the seeds of Egypt's (predominantly) nonviolent uprising. For example, blogger Dalia Ziada translated a comic book about the Montgomery bus boycott (serialised in Peace News in 1958!) into Arabic and distributed over 2,000 copies; and Peter Ackerman's "International Center for Nonviolent Conflict" helped to train activists in Cairo, including several individuals who went on to play roles in both the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings. See "Nothing Spontaneous About It", Sojourners Magazine, May 2011 (

<http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj1105&article=nothing-spontaneous-about-it>, requires free registration); "Shy US Intellectual Created Playbook Used in a Revolution", New York Times, 16 February 2011 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/17/world/middleeast/17sharp.html>); and "Response to: "US non-violence centre trained Egypt activists" by Roula Khalaf", International Centre for Nonviolent Conflict, <http://nonviolent-conflict.org/index.php/about-icnc/setting-the-record-straight/1447>

[6] "That's Enough", Al Ahram, 29 December 2005, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2005/775/sc122.htm>

[7] "A chronology of dissent", Al Ahram, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2005/748/eg10.htm>

[8] Most of the material on the AOC is drawn from "Egyptian revolution fueled by non-violent activists", Reuters, 13 April 2011. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/04/13/us-egypt-revolution-idUSTRE73C18E20110413T>. The English-language section of the AOC's web-site is <http://www.taghier.org/en/news.html>.

[9] "Revolution, Facebook-style", New York Times, 25 January 2009,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/25/magazine/25bloggers-t.html?pagewanted=all>

[10] "Egyptian revolution fueled by non-violent activists", Reuters, 13 April 2011.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/04/13/us-egypt-revolution-idUSTRE73C18E20110413T>.

[11] "A Tunisian-Egyptian Link That Shook Arab History", New York Times, 13 February 2011,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/14/world/middleeast/14egypt-tunisia-protests.html>

[12] See "Fledgling Rebellion on Facebook Is Struck Down by Force in Egypt", Washington Post, 18 May 2008 (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/story/2008/05/17/ST2008051702711.html?hpid=topnews>);

"Going Underground in Cairo", Washington Post, 18 May 2008 (

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/05>

/13/AR2008051302197.html); and "Revolution, Facebook-style", New York Times, 25 January 2009, (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/25/magazine/25bloggers-t.html?pagewanted=all>).

The April 6 group also mobilised hundreds of activists to take to the streets during Israel's 2008/09 assault on Gaza.

[13] "Egypt's Youth Build a New Opposition Movement, Call for Democratic Reform", Associated Press, 16 September 2010, <http://www.cnsnews.com/node/75374>

[14] "Egyptian revolution fueled by non-violent activists", Reuters, 13 April 2011.
<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/04/13/us-egypt-revolution-idUSTRE73C18E20110413>

[15] "A Tunisian-Egyptian Link That Shook Arab History", New York Times, 13 February 2011,
<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/14/world/middleeast/14egypt-tunisia-protests.html>. Tweets, p.59.

[16] "Egyptian revolution fueled by non-violent activists", Reuters, 13 April 2011.
<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/04/13/us-egypt-revolution-idUSTRE73C18E20110413>

[17] Tweets, p.113

[18] "On the Ground" interview with April 6 Youth Movement co-founder Ahmad Salah, 25 February 2011,
<http://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/index.php/learning-and-resources/on-the-ground/1547-ahmed-salah>