

Rights Review



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this issue

Civil War in Côte d'Ivoire? **P.3**

Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan **P. 6**

Feature Focus: Middle East Revolutions **P. 8**

Right Ups: IHRP Events at Law School **P.23**

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Egypt: A View From The Ground

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I arrived in Cairo in the evening of February 11th 2011. It had not been an easy trip. When I left Toronto the night before, Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's embattled President, had just delivered his third speech, defying expectations by failing to resign. My activist friends in Tahrir square, the epicenter of the 17-day revolution, responded by threatening to march on the presidential palace, a move my boyfriend, a Reuters reporter on the ground in Cairo, predicted would result in a blood bath.

The journey from Toronto to Cairo was my longest hiatus from twitter and Al Jazeera since January 25th, the day pro-reform protests began in Egypt, and the date that has become the name of the revolution.

Walking through the deathly quiet Cairo airport, I tried not to attract attention, conscious that things could have changed for the worse in the hours I was in the air. Once through customs and walking towards a taxi, I gingerly asked my driver: "What is the news?" "Mubarak has left," he told me seriously. I stopped in my tracks, switched to Arabic, and said "Bigayd?" - "For real?" "Half an hour ago," he said. He was not joking. I was soon surrounded by a troop of taxi drivers, laughing and shouting, each offering his own version of events, thrilled by my astonishment at the news that Mubarak had left, resigned, gone, given up. As one of the drivers said proudly, shutting the door for me: "Bye, bye Mubarak!"

Driving into Cairo, we passed scenes that would become iconic in the following days: youth climbing onto yellow army tanks waving the flag of their newly liberated nation.

Less than an hour after landing, I was in Tahrir Square, fully immersed in, what I think is safe to say, the largest post-revolutionary party of all time. The cheers, the chants, and the face painting rendered more meaningful by the presence of army tanks, burnt out buildings, and bandaged head wounds. And everywhere thousands of people whose faces said: "We did this!"

Of course, exactly what they did is something that will take longer than 18 days to determine. Mubarak's departure did not leave a vacuum: the beloved military have control of the country and remnants of Mubarak's regime hold key positions in the interim caretaker government. At the many revolutionary parties I attended, where people broke curfew to dance in circles and chant the "best of" from the revolution, talk returned constantly to the serious road ahead. Have we witnessed a military coup or a revolution? How can we move forward until we have cleaned out the regime? Why focus on the composition of the interim government, when they will be gone in six months? What about the constitution? How much change is enough?

My friends at these parties are intellectuals, activists and artists, but this level of political consciousness was not limited to such circles. Everywhere I went in Egypt, everyone I talked to had an opinion, a stark contrast to the years I lived here between 2007 and 2010 when people usually answered questions about politics with a grumble and a shrug. Now, a waiter carefully listed his top five choices for president, a taxi driver argued that nothing will change until the dreaded Ministry of the Interior is disbanded, a hotel clerk demanded that Mubarak go on trial, and my favorite, a shop keeper who

(Continued on page 9)



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