

👁 Eyewitness

Live From Tahrir Square



Reporter Cassandra Nelson has filed stories for JS from such hot spots as Afghanistan, Darfur, Nigeria, and Gaza. As January's protests started, Nelson set off for Cairo and soon sent us this dispatch from the center of the revolt. Her account ends in the third week of the protests, before Hosni Mubarak was forced to step down as Egypt's President after almost 30 years in power.

Demonstrations broke out in Egypt on Tuesday, January 25, sparked by the sudden revolution in Tunisia that ended the reign of its long-standing autocratic ruler, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. As the popular uprising against Egypt's President, Hosni Mubarak, took on momentum in the first few days, tens of thousands of protesters flooded the streets, where they were met—often brutally—by the police and undercover government security forces.

I arrived in Cairo late at night on the “Friday of Fury,” as protesters called January 28. We drove into the city through the wreckage of the day's violence, which had left a police station and government buildings in flames. The headquarters of Mubarak's National Democratic Party were still burning as we arrived in the city center.

“Freedom!” chanted the crowds along the banks of the Nile River, defying a curfew that troops were enforcing with armored personnel carriers and tear gas.

The Egyptian protesters had come together to challenge poverty, rising food prices, corruption, massive unemployment, and most of all their dictatorial President. Mubarak, 82, has ruled Egypt with an iron fist for nearly 30 years, rigging elections and using secret police and security forces to crack down on any challenges to his regime.

The protesters—many of them young, secular, and well-educated—mobilized themselves mainly via social-media sites like Facebook and Twitter. Texting and BBMs also played a key role.

Youssef, 22, recently earned a degree in engineering. He told me that he'd heard about the protests in e-mails from friends who saw on Facebook that there'd be a big demonstration on Friday.

“Facebook was definitely the spark,” Youssef said. “I'm not an activist. We just came out because we're so

fed up with the situation and didn't feel we had anything to lose.”

Tahrir (Liberation) Square, in the center of Cairo, was the main stage of the uprising. In its first days, protesters fought their way to the square. Now they were camped out and determined to stay until their demands were met. Many of the protesters brought sleeping bags and blankets. Some pitched tents. The army brought in more than 20 tanks to help control the crowds.

The protesters seemed to like the army, in sharp contrast to their hatred of the police.* I watched as protesters welcomed soldiers—offering them food and sharing cigarettes with them. The soldiers responded by letting protesters sit on their tanks. I even saw soldiers allowing protesters to spray paint “Mubarak Out!” on a few tanks.

The demonstrators' primary demand, expressed through chanting and protest signs, was that Mubarak must go. After decades of oppression in Egypt, they wanted the chance to freely and fairly elect a President. They hungered for some form of democracy.

Mahmoud Fakhri, 18, and a first-year university student, told me: “I know that in America you have rights. You can express your opinion. You do not live in fear. That's what we want. We're only asking for democracy; nothing more.”

As the uprising moved into its third week, at least 300 people had been killed and more than 5,000 injured. Despite the protesters' demands and some promised reforms from the government, the streets remained filled with protesters when I left Egypt.

Egypt's future is far from decided, but the country will never be the same again.

**See note on the Egyptian army in Fast Facts.*

FAST FACTS

OFFICIAL NAME: Arab Republic of Egypt

LAND AREA: 386,660 sq mi
(two thirds the size of Alaska)

POPULATION: 80.4 million

ETHNIC GROUPS: Egyptian, 99.6%; other, 0.4 %

RELIGIONS: Muslim (mostly Sunni), 90%; Coptic Christian, 9%; other Christian, 1%

LANGUAGES: Arabic; English and French widely understood by the educated

LITERACY RATE: 83% male; 59% female

SECONDARY SCHOOL ENROLLMENT: 88% male; 82% female

LIFE EXPECTANCY: 69 years male; 75 years female

PER CAPITA GDP*: \$6,000

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE: 9.7% (2010)

LIVING ON LESS THAN \$2 A DAY: 18.5% (2005)

**Per capita gross domestic product is often used as a measure of a nation's wealth.*

SOURCES: CIA World Factbook, Population Reference Bureau, United Nations Development Programme, World Bank

The Uprising in Brief

• The Nation of Egypt

Modern Egypt was created in 1922, when it won its independence from Great Britain. It was a monarchy until 1952, when a military coup led by Gamal Abdel Nasser seized power, declaring Egypt a republic a year later. Nasser led Egypt until his death in 1970. The struggle for power that resulted was won in 1971 by Anwar el-Sadat, who was President until his assassination a decade later. Hosni Mubarak, who became President after Sadat's death, had the longest reign in modern Egypt.

• Tunisia: The Spark

Egyptian demonstrators were inspired by protests in the North African country of Tunisia. Last December 17, a 26-year-old fruit and vegetable seller set himself on fire after a police officer confiscated his scale and slapped him. The desperate—ultimately fatal—act by a man trying to support his family sparked protests that police could not contain. On January 14, the country's dictator, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, gave up power after 23 years and fled the country.

• A Sudden, Explosive Start

After the departure of Tunisia's dictator, young Egyptians in Cairo called for a "Day of Rage" on Tuesday, January 25. The protest began peacefully before police attacked with tear gas and water hoses. Over the next few days, the crowds grew, and the protests spread to other cities.

• A Priceless Past

Some of the worst violence in Cairo came dangerously close to the Egyptian Museum. The museum contains the mummy of Ramses III and many other priceless artifacts that date to the earliest years of Egyptian civilization. According to news reports, pro-government sympathizers, who attacked the protesters, tried to set the museum afire, hoping that the anti-Mubarak crowds would be blamed for the damage.

• Egypt's Influential Army

Egypt's military and security forces are very different institutions. Protesters did not trust the security forces, including the police, whom they considered to be agents of Mubarak's state. Most of the lethal violence committed during the first days of the demonstrations was blamed on them. In contrast, the army is relatively independent of Egypt's civilian government. On the fourth day of the protests, protesters welcomed soldiers into Tahrir Square as protection against the police. On January 31, the military announced that it would not fire on peaceful protesters, which many observers saw as key to the success of the demonstrations. When Mubarak finally ceded power on February 11, it was the army that gave him the final shove.

• What's Next for Egypt?

On February 11, Egypt's army took control of the country, soon dissolving the Mubarak-controlled Parliament and suspending the country's corrupt constitution. For the immediate future, the Supreme Military Council is Egypt's working government. As *JS* went to press, the military announced that it would convene a panel of jurists to draw up new constitutional amendments. According to an initial timetable, the amendments would be submitted to a national referendum within two months, and general elections held in six months. No one knows if or when Egypt will make the actual transfer to a democratic state, or whether the military will be willing to give up the power they currently hold.