

Freedom's movement

Egypt offers a new template for change in the Middle East that long reeled from its own sense of stagnation

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THE future of the Arab world, perched between revolt and the contempt of a crumbling order, was fought for in the streets of downtown Cairo on Wednesday. Tens of thousands of protesters who have reimagined the very notion of citizenship in a tumultuous week of defiance proclaimed with sticks, home-made bombs and a shower of rocks that they would not surrender their revolution to the full brunt of an authoritarian government that answered their calls for change with violence.

The Arab world watched a moment that suggested it would never be the same again — and waited to see whether protest or crackdown would win the day. Words like “uprising” and “revolution” only hint at the scale of events in Egypt, which have already reverberated across Yemen, Jordan, Syria and even Saudi Arabia, offering a new template for change in a region that long reeled from its own sense of stagnation. “Every Egyptian understands now,” said Magdi al-Sayyid, one of the protesters.

The protesters have spoken for themselves to a government that, like many across the Middle East, treated them as a nuisance. For years, pundits have predicted that Islamists would be the force that toppled governments across the Arab world. But so far, they have been submerged in an outpouring of popular dissent that speaks to a unity of message, however fleeting — itself a sea change in the region's political landscape. In the vast panorama of Tahrir Square on Wednesday, Egyptians were stationed at makeshift barricades, belying past dismissals of the power of the Arab street. “The street is not afraid of governments anymore,” said



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Shawki al-Qadi, an opposition lawmaker in Yemen, itself roiled by change. “It is the opposite. Governments and their security forces are afraid of the people now. The new generation, the generation of the Internet, is fearless. They want their full rights, and they want life, a dignified life.”

The power of Wednesday's stand was that it turned those abstractions into reality.

The battle was waged by Mohammed Gamil, a dentist in a blue tie who ran toward the barricades of Tahrir Square. It was joined by Fayeqa Hussein, a veiled mother of seven who filled a Styrofoam container with rocks. Magdi Abdel-Rahman, a 60-year-old grandfather, kissed the ground before throwing himself against crowds mobilised by a state bent on driving them from the square. And the charge was led by Yasser Hamdi, who said his two-year-old daughter would live a life better than the one he endured. “Aren't you men?” he shouted. “Let's go!”

As the crowd pushed back the government's men, down a street of airline offices, banks and a bookstore called L'Orientaliste, Abdel-Rahman made

the stakes clear. “They want to take our revolution from us,” he declared.

The Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's largest opposition force, has entered the fray. In a poignant moment, its followers knelt in prayer at dusk, their faces lighted by the soft glow of burning fires a stone's throw away. But Abdel-Rahman's description of the uprising as a revolution suggested that the events of the past week had overwhelmed even the Brotherhood, long considered the sole agent of change here.

“Dignity” was a word often used Wednesday, and its emphasis underlined the breadth of a movement that is, so far, leaderless. Neither the Brotherhood nor a handful of opposition leader — men like Mohammed ElBaradei or Ayman Nour — have managed to articulate hopelessness, the humiliations at the hands of the police and the outrage at having too little money to marry, echoed in the streets of Palestinian camps in Jordan and in the urban misery of Baghdad's Sadr City. For many, the Brotherhood itself is a vestige of an older order that has failed to deliver.

“The problem is that for 30 years, Mubarak didn't let us build an alternative,” said Adel Wehba, as he watched the tumult in the square. “No alternative for anything.”

The lack of an alternative may have led to the uprising, making the street the last option for not only the young and dispossessed but also virtually every element of Egypt's population — turbanned clerics, businessmen, film directors and well-to-do engineers. Months ago, despair at the prospect of change in the Arab world was commonplace. Protesters on Wednesday acted as though they were making a last stand at what they had won, in an uprising that is distinctly nationalist. “He won't go,” President Hosni Mubarak's supporters chanted on the other side. “He will go,” went the reply. “We're not going to go.”

The word “traitor” rang out Wednesday. The insult was directed at Mubarak, and it echoed the sentiment heard in so many parts of the Arab world these days — governments of an American-backed order in most of the region have lost their legitimacy, built on the idea that people would surrender their rights for the prospect of secu-

rity and stability. In the square on Wednesday, protesters offered an alternative, their empowerment standing as possibly the most remarkable legacy of a people who often lamented their apathy.

Everyone seemed joined in the moment, fists, batons and rocks banging any piece of metal to rally themselves. A man stood on a tank turret, urging protesters forward. Another shouted at Mubarak's men. “Come here!” he said. “Here is where's right.” Men and women ferried rocks in bags and boxes to the barricades. “We're not going to destroy our country,” said Mohammed Kamil, a 48-year-old, surging with the crowd. “We're not going to let this dog make us do that.”

From minute-by-minute coverage on Arabic channels to conversations from Iraq to Morocco, the Middle East watched breathlessly at a moment as compelling as any in the Arab world in a lifetime. For the first time in a generation, Arabs seem to be looking again to Egypt for leadership, and that sense of destiny was voiced throughout the day.

“I tell the Arab world to stand with us until we win our freedom,” said Khaled Yusuf, a cleric from Al Azhar, a once esteemed institution of religious scholarship now beholden to the government. “Once we do, we're going to free the Arab world.”

For decades, the Arab world has waited for a saviour — be it Gamal Abdel-Nasser, the charismatic Egyptian president, or even, for a time, Saddam Hussein. No one was waiting for a saviour on Wednesday. Before nearly three decades of accumulated authority — the power of a state that can mobilise thousands to heed its whims — people had themselves.

“I'm fighting for my freedom,” Noha al-Ustad said as she broke bricks on the curb. “For my right to express myself. For an end to oppression. For an end to injustice.”

“Go forward,” the cries rang out, and she did, disappearing into a sea of men.

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